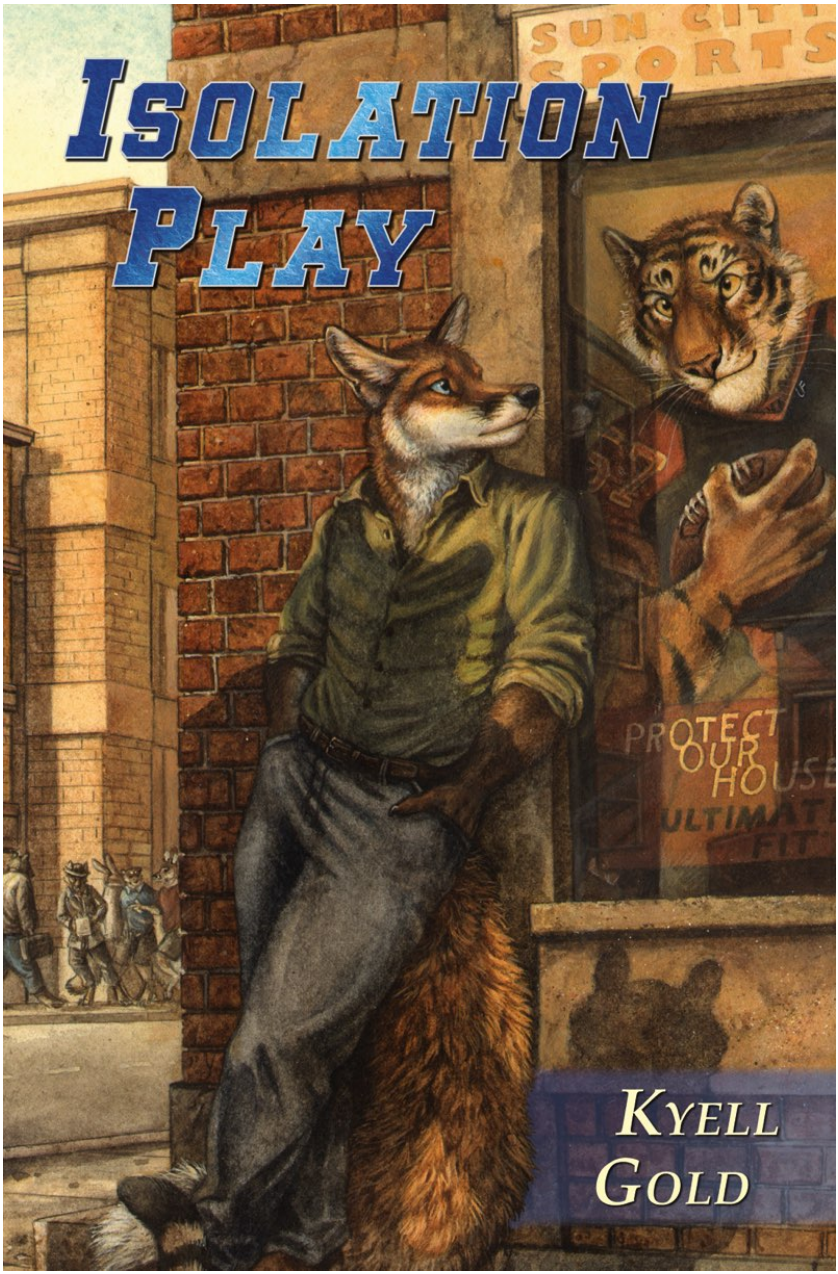
ISOLATION
PLAY
SUN CITY
SPORTS
PROTECT
OUR
HOUSE
ULTIMATE
FIT
KYELL
GOLD

Isolation Play

Book 2 in the Out of Position series

Kyell Gold

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This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed within are fictitious.

ISOLATION PLAY

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Created with **Vellum**

For my husband
At the end of our engagement
And the beginning of the rest of our life

Foreword: Kickoff

The first thing you need to know about this book is that while it is the second book to feature the characters Dev and Lee, it is perfectly enjoyable on its own. The first book, *Out of Position*, details many events only alluded to herein, but the story of *Isolation Play* is self-contained.

The second thing you need to know about this book is that it is not about football. That said, there is football in it, and so I have included in the preface two short guides to the game from the first book. I hope they will be helpful in understanding some of the context of the story.

The third thing you need to know about this book is how grateful I am for all the support and love that has led to it. I was worried about the response to a book that included football in such a prominent role, but my friends and fans embraced my first story of a gay activist fox and football-playing tiger with a fervor beyond anything I could have hoped for. So as a meager token of my very great appreciation, I present this new story.

If you are new to this world, welcome. If you already know Dev and Lee, welcome back. You will see some familiar faces and, I hope, make some new friends (there is a listing of characters in the back, should you have trouble remembering names). And thank you, thank you, thank you, for giving me the opportunity to share their story with you. Your continuing support and enthusiasm is a gift I will never be able to repay sufficiently.

The last thing you need to know about this book is that the story begins on page one. I'll stop talking now.

-Kyell Gold, January 2011

Lee's Guide to Football (Lee)

When I was seven, I had a bunch of classmates ask me whether I wanted the Devils or the Firebirds to win the championship. I didn't know what they were talking about. My dad liked football, but I liked stories, and I may have said a couple things I shouldn't have about people who liked to watch thugs run around on a field and hit each other. So while my mom was combing the playground sand out of my face and chest and tail, my dad started to explain football to me.

Even though I was still at that age where I wanted to be like my dad, I didn't have much interest in football. But with the championship coming up, he thought it was the perfect time to get me started. Whatever else he's done in his life—and I've run through the list more than once—he got me into football. So if you're one of those kids who likes chess and books, listen up, because reading this story you're in the middle of is like growing up in Nicholas Dempsey Middle School. You don't have to like football to get through it, as my dad told me, but it helps.

See, what I always hated about football was that I was bad at it. I'd only played one football game up to then, at camp. I didn't understand the rules. To me, it was just a stupid excuse for big kids to beat up little kids. What my dad told me is that football is actually like a chess game.

Hang on. Stay with me. Imagine you've got these eleven guys. Each one can move in a certain way. You want to advance your

position (symbolized by the football) up the field, either by giving it to a piece and having him carry it forward, or by passing it to a piece down the field. The guys who line up right at the boundary are the offensive line—like a bulwark. Behind them stands the quarterback, and behind him the halfback (or running back) and fullback. They're the ones who will carry the ball if you choose to run it. Out to the edges are the speedy guys whose job is to run down the field and be ready if you choose to throw the ball: the wide receivers and tight end.

Your quarterback is like a queen (and believe me, more of them are than you'd think). He's the most powerful piece and he directs the offense. Wolves and lions make good quarterbacks, because they have this inbred pack mentality. The offensive line is like pawns: they only move a very short distance, and their job is to protect the queen. You get big, aggressive guys in there, like bears and boars, because they also have to move the defenders in such a way as to leave room for the running back to run through. This is harder than it sounds, but I'm not going to get into it. The tight end (yes, we've all heard the jokes) either helps block or runs a short way down the field to act as a receiver.. Then you've got the running back and fullback, wolverines and horses most often, who are like the bishops: they have to move through the spaces cleared by the pawns. The knights would be the tight end and the slot receiver, who can either help defend or jump short distances down the field. And wide receivers are rooks, who take advantage of long open columns to run down the field. For all those last ones, you get deer, cheetahs, and foxes. And what you have to do with these pieces is design a strategy that will help you gain ground, program a series of moves in advance, and watch them go. Meanwhile, our opponent has his own eleven guys, and he's trying to figure out what your guys are going to do so he can stop them.

If you're defending, your aim is to stop the progress of the other team. This is the part of football I hated, by the way, because I could never tackle, and they could flatten me with one arm. The

QB starts out with the ball, so you go after him. You look at the situation on the field, you look at the way the pieces are set up, and you set up your guys to hopefully disrupt what the offense is doing. Your defensive line, setting up across from the offensive line, is actually attacking, which is why the best ones tend to be large, fast predators, like big cats. Then you have a bunch of guys that stay behind the defensive line to mess with the wide receivers and tight end if they get back into that territory. The best ones there are medium-weight predators, like coyotes, bigger foxes, and cheetahs. And because it's such a big field, you have to decide things like do you assign one defender to each specific offensive player, or do the defenders just cover sections of the field, and so on.

And then, not to make things more complicated, but there's everything else, which is called "special teams." If a team doesn't move the ball well enough on offense, they end up kicking it, either to the other team (a punt) or through the goal, if they're close enough. Horses and rabbits, of course, usually do the kicking. On the other side, you need someone quick and slick to catch the kick and try to run it back, and while you get a couple rabbits who are good at this, the best ones have always been weasels and otters.

The thing that makes football more interesting than chess is that the pieces can actually think (well, some of them) and make decisions on the field. They know what they're supposed to do, but if they see something that'll block them, they can make an adjustment and change it. Sometimes they do really stupid things, which is fun, and sometimes they do amazing things, which is even more fun.

Also, I mean, it's guys in tight clothes. There are closeup shots of the quarterback sticking his paws under the center's tail (with some definite touching). There's muscles galore, occasional tail-grabbing, and after the plays, there's butt-patting. What's not to like?

Quick reference guide: Team Positions

QUARTERBACK (QB)
Team leader, strong arm
Wolves, lions

RUNNING back (halfback or fullback)
RB (HB, FB)
Compact, solid runners
Wolverines, horses, sometimes deer

WIDE RECEIVER, or wideout (WR)
Speed, precision, good hands (height an asset)
Deer, cheetahs, foxes

OffENSIVE LINE (RIGHT/left guard, right/left tackle, center)
OL (LT, LG, C, RG, RT)
Big, tough, protective
Bear, boars

DEFENSIVE LINE (DEFENSIVE TACKLE, defensive end)
DL (DT, DE)
Big, tough, aggressive, predatory
Tigers, polar bears

LINEBACKER (OLB, ILB)
All-around, tough, quick, smart
Cougars, coyotes

DEFENSIVE BACK (SAFETY, cornerback)
DB (S, CB)
Fast, predatory, good hands
Coyotes, foxes, cheetahs

KICKER/punter (K/P)

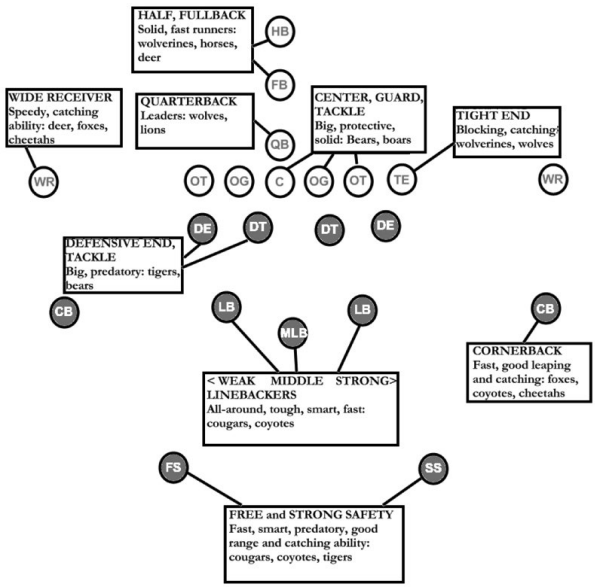
Strong legs

Horses, rabbits

KICK OR PUNT RETURNER (KR/PR)

Quick, slippery

Otters, weasels



Dev's Game-Day Briefing (Dev)

Okay, with Lee telling you what all the players are supposed to do, I can walk you through how an actual game goes. The teams flip a coin at the beginning of the game. Winner gets to pick whether they want to kick off or receive. To receive means you start on offense and have the first chance to score. But sometimes teams want to kick off, because if you start the first half on defense, you start the second half on offense. Also if you stop the other team right away on the first drive, it gives you a lot of energy going into your offense. The coaches all figure this out. I just know I liked being first on the field.

When a team gets the ball, they line up like Lee described. They get four chances to move the ball ten yards; those are "downs." So there's first down, second down, third down, fourth down. I don't know why they're called that, they just are. Anyway, on first down usually you try to run the ball. That means the QB hands it to the RB and he tries to get ten yards up the field. Actually, if he gets four or five, that's pretty good, and then on second down you might try to run it again. If you can get three or four yards every time you run the ball, you can just run it all day long.

The thing is, though, if you don't get your ten yards in four tries, the other team gets the ball. So most of the time you only take three tries, and if you don't get ten yards, you punt. Punting is where the punter kicks the ball down the field and the other team gets to catch it and try to run back with it. Basically you do that so

that they don't get the ball at the spot where you didn't get your ten yards. This is called "field position," as in having good field position (near the other team's goal) or bad field position (near your own).

The other thing you can do on fourth down, if you have good field position, is kick a field goal. If you've gotten close to the other team's goal, but not actually into it, you have your kicker try to kick the ball through the goalposts (the uprights, we call the arms on either side), and you get three points if he makes it.

Once you get your ten yards, you get a whole new set of downs. This keeps up until you punt, or get a field goal, or score a touchdown by getting into the other team's goal. Or—this is where I come in—until one of your players loses the ball and the other team gets it. It has to be a "live" ball, which is complicated and there are lots of rules around it but essentially it means that the play isn't over yet. So if your running back drops the ball and I pick it up, or your quarterback is a crappy passer and I get the pass before his receiver does, then that's a "change of possession" and the ball belongs to us. We can run it back as far as we can on that play, then our offense takes over on the next one.

That's why I love playing defense. We get to be in on the big plays, the game-changing ones that "turn the tide," "shift the momentum," whatever you want to call it. There's nothing like the feeling you get when you get your paws on the ball as a defender. Nothing.

Not to say there's nothing better. Just nothing like it.

Map: Forester Universe

I'm not saying the Forester Universe cities are in the United States. But if they were, this is where they'd be.

Chevali Firebirds Schedule

Regular season games, 2008

9/7, week 1: at Crystal City (L, 24-35)
9/14, week 2: Kerina (W, 31-24)
9/21, week 3: New Kestle (W, 24-10)
9/28, week 4: at Hilltown (L, 0-3)
10/5, week 5: at Aventira (W, 10-3)

10/12, week 6: Millenport
10/19: bye
10/26, week 8: Gateway
11/2, week 9: Highbourne
11/9, week 10: at New Kestle
11/16, week 11: at Hellentown
11/23, week 12: at Port City
12/1 (Mon), week 13: Pelagia
12/8, week 14: at Yerba

12/15, week 15: Freestone
12/22, week 16: at Kerina
12/29, week 17: Hellentown

Part I

1

Meet The Press (Lee)

Every ending is also a beginning. It's a pat kind of English-lit saying, but I really understand it today. I'm sitting in the back of the Chevali Firebirds media room, watching my boyfriend come out on national TV. Dev's relief that his hiding is over shines from him like sunlight, in his golden eyes, his perked ears, his bright smile. I, on the opposite side of a small herd of reporters from him, am thinking more about what comes next.

But I wouldn't ask him that right now, even if I wanted to pretend to be a reporter. Dev looks so good, so composed and happy, that I can't believe he's the same tiger who's been agonizing over our secret for a month, ever since my ex-best friend Brian posted allegations about the two of us on the web. He's been up there for over an hour, fur still smoothly in place, Firebirds tie still hanging neatly in front of his collared shirt. He smiles at the reporters, patiently answering questions that would have driven a smart-ass fox like me to savage sarcasm by now.

They started with the obvious, "do you have a boyfriend?" Dev said that he was only here to talk about himself. He had to repeat that four times before they stopped asking about his boyfriend and whether he knows any other gay players. They're a bit lost about where to go from there, asking, "would you redesign the Firebirds uniforms?" and "do you look at your teammates in the shower?" (no to both). One of them asks, "What do your parents think of

this?" and Dev does get a bit emotional at that.

"My father was the one who taught me to play football. He taught me to give it everything I have, and not hold anything back. I think he would be proud that I'm applying that in my life as I am on the field."

That he says, 'I think he would be' and not 'he is' speaks volumes to me. His father's been only moderately more supportive than my own, which is kind of like being moderately more damp than the Chevali desert. The stock answer is enough to satisfy the reporters, who move on to ask him whether he uses any particular brand of fur conditioner ("whatever they have in the locker room"). But the real questions, the serious questions, are only being asked in my head.

Like: what now? When his sexuality was just a rumor on Brian's blog, the crowds at Aventira spit and jeered. When he visits the enlightened town of Millenport, there might be more. And that's just the fans. Will the other players go after him out of fear of being beaten by a faggot? Football's a violent enough game that if someone really wanted to hurt him, they could.

At least he has the support of a few teammates. The other Firebirds behind him have stayed pretty upbeat throughout, from star quarterback Aston York, the grey wolf who keeps grinning and looking around as though he's the center of attention, to Fisher Kingston, Dev's best friend on the team and one of the few other tigers, who manages to smile and look grim all at once. Coach Samuelson, a tall grey wolf, stands on the other side from Fisher, with about the same determined, tight smile. He's the kind of coach who'd come out and support his players in public no matter what. Behind closed doors, who knows? He's a good guy, from what Dev tells me, but I don't want to take anything for granted.

The other people on the podium were his pretend girlfriend Caroll, a black panther and minor movie star, and his agent Ogleby, a twitchy ferret. Caroll is still sitting beside him smiling, but then, she's a professional. Who knows how she feels or what

she's going to say when the cameras are off. Certainly their engagement is off now. Ogleby bolted as soon as Dev said those magic words about the rumors he was gay: "Completely true." I'm sure he'll only stay away until he gets the first phone call from a prospective sponsor. And this is kind of his fault anyway. If he'd just ignored Brian's blog, not made a big deal about it, chances are nobody would have noticed it and Dev wouldn't have had to call this press conference.

The one question I think I have answered is about poor, sad, angry Brian. He strutted into the press conference talking about how he knew the truth, hoping Dev would deny the rumors so that he could have his 'Liar, liar' moment in front of all the reporters. I wasn't watching him when Dev cut off his plan; the next time I looked over, he was gone. I got his text message, five minutes later. All it said was: *Have a nice life*. It'd be nice to think that he means it.

It's a very Brian sort of ending, a dramatic exit, stage right, even if it is several beats after the spotlight's left him. For all the work he put into outing Dev, you'd think he'd stick around to see the aftermath. But you wouldn't think that if you knew Brian. Once Dev upstaged him, nobody needed to talk to Brian anymore. And Brian hates to be marginalized.

Not that Dev did it for that reason. I'm as sure as I can be that he did it because it was the right thing to do. I dressed up in drag for the conference to show him my support if he wanted to keep our relationship secret. He's the one risking his life out there on the field.

He'll never believe me if I tell him I didn't know what he was going to do, but I didn't. I suspected, because I know him. But I didn't *know*, and I certainly didn't expect the flood of emotion and tears that came with his announcement. I never doubted his commitment to me, but coming out the way he did was an affirmation, the closest he could come to saying, 'I love you' in public. And, well, that got to me.

The reporters sitting around me shot sympathetic looks my way while I was crying, completely misinterpreting my tears. “Girlfriend,” a cougar muttered to his pal. The leopard nodded, looking back. A lean swift fox with a sharp muzzle sitting two seats to my left stared, but didn’t say anything.

An hour and a half after Dev spoke the words, “Completely true,” the team’s press liaison, Vince, steps forward to cut everything off. “That’s it, boys,” he says. “Thanks for coming.” He leans back and mutters something to Dev that makes my big tiger grin.

I sit in the back and try to relax as they file out Dev and the other players. As they pass my row, I give him a huge smile. He acknowledges it with the slightest creasing of his eyes, and then he’s gone, his coach and teammates disappearing after him.

The reporters up front, the well-paid ones with laptops and satellite links, they stick around to file their stories from the press room. The ones in the back mostly file out, slowly enough that I can catch their words: an armadillo saying, “he’s got guts,” a coyote telling a fox, “they’re gonna flatten him next game,” a cougar saying, “fucking faggots” into his phone.

The cougar and leopard in front of me stick around, though, leaning back over their seats. “Life ain’t fair,” the leopard says. “Fake-dating an actress and dating a vixen and shit, turns out he’s queer. I can’t get that kind of action.”

“Be sensitive, dude,” the cougar says. “Miss Vix here just got dumped on national TV. You want a shoulder to cry on, sweetie?”

“I’m fine.” I sigh. I don’t really need to give it that dramatic little touch, but they’re being really attentive, and I’m a sensitive vixen. On the outside. “It’ll just be hard. Watching him on TV, now.”

“Won’t have to worry too long,” the leopard says. “Corcoran’s a real Family Values guy. Miski’ll be traded in a week. Probably to Yerba, or Port City. Somewhere liberal, anyway.” He laughs harshly.

“Dunno,” the cougar says. “Might wait ’til Mitchell comes back.”

Corey Mitchell is the cougar who plays Dev’s position. When he was injured, Dev took over the starting role. I think he’ll be back in three or four weeks—another thing to worry about. I play up a naïve smile. “Traded?” I say.

The cougar turns to me with a big smile. “John Corcoran is the owner of the Firebirds, sweetheart. We think he might not like a fag—a homosexual on his team.”

I’m framing a sweet answer that doesn’t let on that of course I know who John Corcoran is, but I don’t get the chance to say anything. “Hey,” the leopard calls to my left. “Hal, you know Corcoran. One week or six?”

I follow his look. The short swift fox is sitting sideways, looking at me. He’s got on a tan blazer over a t-shirt, his scent so strong on them that I know he hasn’t washed them in a while. His jeans are frayed at the cuffs over his brown-furred feet. The jeans aren’t dirty, so I assume the brown is his natural fur color. He doesn’t smell dirty, either, just strong, a familiar farm country smell with overtones of scotch. I can practically tell the make of his father’s tractor.

He shrugs. “Don’t know that he’ll be traded at all.”

“C’mon!” The leopard laughs. “Fuckin’ Republican douchebag like Corcoran?”

“I know what you think of him,” Hal says. “I don’t think he’ll trade Miski.”

“Oh, like you’d know.” The leopard turns back to the cougar. “Twenty bucks says he’s gone in a month.”

The cougar slaps his paw. “You’re on, pal.”

They shake. While the leopard hefts his bag over his shoulder, the cougar turns and leans down to me. “You sure I can’t buy ya dinner or something?”

I put on a narrow-eyed, polite smile. “Thanks,” I say. “I think I’ll just go home.”

He holds out a card. “Case you change your mind. Don’t like the idea of a sweet gal like you cryin’ alone.”

My fingers brush his as I take it. I get a little thrill from playing with him, but it’s not worth taking it any further. “Thanks,” I say.

When he’s gone, I compose myself in my best ladylike manner, smoothing my dress over my knees. The room is almost empty now, save for a couple reporters two rows up, and the swift fox still sitting to my left. I consider him.

He knows the Firebirds’ owner. He doesn’t think Dev will be traded, or let go. Why not? Also, he’s looking at me sideways and trying really hard not to be obvious about it.

So I lean over and say, “Hal, was it?”

He looks up without a start, and smiles. “That’s right, miss.”

“I didn’t mean it,” I say.

His ears flick in curiosity. I go on. “About seeing him on the field. I love to watch him play. And he loves it so much. It’d kill him to leave. I hope he’s a Firebird for a long time.”

His smile broadens. His voice is buttery smooth. “Long as he keeps pickin’ off passes, I’m with you,” he says.

“Do you really know Corcoran?”

The smile dims. He shrugs. “In a manner of speakin’.”

I sit back and sigh. I don’t want to see Dev lose the friends he’s made on the Firebirds, especially now. But if I let on how important it is to me, Hal might clam up about it. “I see.”

“Hey,” he says. “It’s okay. I know when you go through somethin’ like this, you just wanna talk about anything else.”

“You don’t know what this is like.” I’m sure he feels the raw scorn there, even if he doesn’t understand all the levels on which I mean it. I just know it, though. If he had someone as special as Dev, he’d be running home to her. Or him.

“Sweetheart,” he says. “Maybe my ex didn’t call a press conference to dump me. But that’s only ’cause she didn’t think of it.”

“I’m not your sweetheart,” I say.

“Whoa, whoa.” He holds up a paw. “I’m just bein’ friendly.”

I look down at my phone, to hide my little grin. He’s friendly, he’s interested. I ignore the blinking alert of new messages and drop the phone into my purse. “I do appreciate that. And I’m sorry about your ex.” I get up, putting on my sad smile to give him, ears down: a cast-off vixen putting on a brave face. He’d only be able to resist it if he’s gay.

“Hey.” His ears are down, but he’s trying his best to smile. “Don’t s’pose you’d let me buy you a cup of coffee?”

Guess he’s not gay. I look down at his notepad. “Don’t you need to write up your story?”

He shrugs. “All the big guys have theirs already going out. I don’t have a deadline that can’t wait for a lovely lady who needs an ear.”

“What paper extends deadlines for their reporters to flirt?”

His ears fold back. “I’m freelance,” he says. “As of two weeks ago.”

I sit back in the chair. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah,” he says, “real kick in the teeth. First the wife, then the job. Banner fu—friggin’ year.”

“Just you, or did the whole paper go under?” I say.

“Whole paper. The Chevali Standard,” he says. “Guess you ain’t from here.”

He’s sharp. I change the subject, risk another nudge at his relationship with the owner. “So Corcoran lets you come in here? Can’t he get you a regular job?”

His ears droop another inch. “Lots of guys outta work. You know how he made his money? Furniture stores. I don’t wanna sell couches.” He makes a visible effort to be cheerful. “So how about that coffee?”

I sigh. A little more reluctance. Give him some play. “I’m not sure I’m up for it, honestly.”

“If it makes you feel better,” he says, “whoever he’s with, it won’t last.”

I tilt my head. “What?”

He gestures toward the podium with his thin muzzle. “That spotted skunk out there was going on about the truth. Musta had something on him—pictures, e-mail logs, something like that—and threatened to out him, only Miski one-upped him. Did you know?”

The spotted skunk is Brian. I remember him sitting in a restaurant, telling me how good it’ll be for gay rights when he outs my boyfriend. I see him snarling at Fisher to give back his camcorder with the picture of me and Dev kissing, when he caught us in the Firebirds’ locker room. I don’t look at my phone, where his final message to me is still stored in memory. “No,” I say. “Not really.”

“Well, you don’t just decide to come out, just like that. So you gotta figure this boyfriend of his…” He stops at my raised eyebrows. “If he ain’t got a boyfriend, how’s he bein’ blackmailed? Takes two to make a picture you can blackmail someone with. Plus, he skated real nice ’round those questions. You can tell.”

“*You* can,” I say.

“Reporter’s instinct.” He taps his nose. “But that’s what I’m wonderin’. Where’s the boyfriend? Might not want to be up on stage, but he oughta be here. Either it’s some guy on the team or it’s some other guy, right?”

I wonder how many other people are drawing those conclusions. My paw straightens my dress. “That does seem to cover all the possibilities.”

“You don’t have any idea who…?” Before I can answer, he shakes his head. “Nah, sorry I asked. I still don’t wanna think about the guy who’s fu—” He looks away, out a window or maybe at something I can’t see. “Who’s with my ex,” he mumbles.

I give him a moment. “It is still rather raw,” I say softly.

“Look,” he says. “I know when I got dumped, my buds were useless. They’re all like, ‘you’re better off without her’ and ‘she’s a bitch,’ and…” He trails off.

I nod, slowly. “But you still love her. You can’t just turn it off.”

His ears lift a bit, his smile curling up at the corners of his mouth. “Yeah.”

I’ve got him hooked. He’s hoping to catch a girl on the rebound, either for a quickie or, well, probably just for a quickie. Be careful, I remind myself in Dev’s voice. I can take care of myself, I remind myself in mine. “Let me see if my ride is here.”

I take out the phone again. There’s a text from Dev: *3:55 pm. Luv u 3*. The ‘3’ is either a typo or his attempt to say he loves me more than usual. Either way, it’s adorable. I type in quickly, *Busy?*

While I’m waiting for the answer, I flip through the rest of my missed messages. A call from my college friend Salim, and a call from my father. Two texts from Salim, the first saying simply, *OMG*, which is funny because Salim never uses netspeak, and the second saying, *did you ask him to do this?* The last is a call from Morty, the head of collegiate scouting over at the Hilltown Dragons. My boss.

Shit. I should’ve expected that. The Dragons drafted Dev on my advice, a year and a half ago, before trading him to Chevali. So Morty knows I know Dev, but he doesn’t know we’re dating. He doesn’t even know I’m gay. I mean, I’ve never told him. I did tell him to stop calling people ‘queer’ and ‘faggot,’ but I also told him to stop telling ethnic jokes. Just because I never go to strip clubs with him...or talk about a girlfriend...well, some guys, you can do everything but kiss your boyfriend in front of them and they won’t pick up on it. Others just know. I don’t know if Morty ‘just knows,’ but I do know that you don’t get to be a head of scouting by being bad at judging people.

I can’t listen to the voicemail right now. The reporter’s sharp ears would pick up anything Morty said. But it’s okay, right? He can’t fire me for being gay. Work would be a little uncomfortable, working with all those ex-jocks. I can deal with that, though. And now Dev’s out, if I want us to be able to go out together, I’ll have to come out too.

I’ll go to Morty’s office tomorrow, lay it out for him. Hey,

maybe he'll call a press conference.

My reverie comes to a jarring halt when the phone buzzes again, with a message from Dev: *Coach.*

So that could be a little while, or it could be five minutes. Samuelson doesn't go in for long discussions, but this isn't a usual situation. I look again at Hal, who's checking his phone, but his eyes are unfocused and I'm sure he's just doing it to look busy.

I really want to go with him for coffee. It's because he knows Corcoran, I say to myself. I could really be giving Dev an edge. Plus, he is or was in the media. He's chummy with reporters. Maybe he could get us some good press coverage. And if you ignore the tractor smell, he's kind of cute, too. The fact that I probably shouldn't talk to him any more has nothing to do with it.

Ping me when you're free, I write to Dev, and then close the phone. "I have a few minutes," I say. "Know a good place?"

He perks up. "Course I do. Lived here thirty years." He holds out a paw, waiting. "Hal Kinnel."

"Lee," I say, taking his daintily in mine. "Lee White." I have a couple fake names that I use from time to time. I hope he doesn't ask for ID or anything like that.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss White." I almost expect him to bring the fingers to his muzzle, but he just clasps my paw in his warm pads and shakes it, then releases it.

He takes me three blocks down Redbird Ave., giving me some of the standard post-breakup spiel along the way: it's not about you, it doesn't mean you're a bad person, and so on, right out of "Chicken Soup For The Dumped." I stay demure, keeping my tail curled down, but his swings back and forth, close to me. I make sure it doesn't touch my tail or my leg. Don't want to lead him on.

We stop at a place called "Common Grounds," with an artsy coffee cup in the logo, and a chalkboard menu that dominates the dim, grungy interior as we walk in. I let my eyes adjust to the light, lifting my nose even though coffee overwhelms the initial scents. The little shop is filled with grunge-kitsch: art from the

nearby Chevali University, framed pictures of old writers, posters from seventy-year-old theaters. In one corner, a take-a-book-leave-a-book shelf explains the smell of old paper, and all around, college students hunch over laptops and books, just like they probably still do in Kitteridge's back home in Hilltown. "Interesting place."

"They have wireless," he says, and raises a paw to the mink behind the counter. "Medium latte," he says, "and, uh, whatever the lady wants."

All the drink names have flourishes on the letters, written in different-colored chalk, but the menu is standard. "Vanilla latte," I say. "Small. Nonfat."

He pays and leads me to two overstuffed chairs, an old steamer trunk between them serving as a coffee table. I sweep my tail daintily around my hip and sit down, remembering my upright ladylike posture.

Hal sits across from me. The faint smell of scotch and fox reaches me through the coffee-haze of the small café as he leans forward. "Really," he says earnestly, "this coming out, it's not about you."

"I know," I say. Fittingly, because I know that Dev's speech *was* about me, I have to rub my eyes. Hal, of course, takes that the wrong way.

"Hey," he says, soothingly, "it's okay. You'll get over it, you'll meet someone. You're really beautiful, you're sweet, you smell terrific..."

I should; I pay $30 a bottle for this scent. "I know, I know," I say.

"You had no idea he was gay?"

I shake my head, and then meet his eyes. "Well, there were signs," I say, putting a little catch in my voice, "but I didn't know what they meant."

"Like what?"

I look pointedly at the notebook sticking out of his pocket. "Is

this for a story?"

He starts, sitting straighter. "Hey, no."

I narrow my eyes. "Really?"

"Well..." His ears fold down. "I mean, I need to sell stuff to get by. If there's a good fluff story, I could sell it to some women's mags. 'Is Your Man Gay? Tips From Devlin Miski's Ex.' Shit like that—sorry, Miss. I mean, things like that. Anything to help pay the bills."

I shake my head and take a sip of the latte. It's hot, strong, and not quite as sweet as I like it. "What about, like, stories of how difficult it is for a gay athlete?"

He frowns. His ears stay down, his voice flat. "Those're gonna be all over, this week."

"Sure, vague, abstract ones with no source."

His ears perk. He takes a sip and puts down the coffee. "You could get me quotes from Miski? You think he'll still talk to you?"

"He just dumped me on national TV." I give him my best calculated smile. "I'd say he owes me one."

He rolls his eyes. "If you can hold him to that, I should get you to go talk to Cimarine."

"Is that her name?"

His ears flatten. "Yeah. She's..."

I wait, but he doesn't finish the thought. "How long ago?"

"Three months and two days." He barks a sharp, humorless laugh. "Not that I'm countin'."

"And did you have any idea it was coming?"

"Hell, like you said, there were signs. One big one, really, but I didn't think..."

I lean in a little. "Did you smell another guy on her?"

His ears flatten, and his muzzle scrunches up. "Naw. Naw, it was...something I did."

"Took her for granted?" He doesn't seem like the cheating type, but you never know.

His ears shoot straight up. "Hell, no!" he says, indignant. "I

never forgot a birthday or anniversary."

"Then what—"

"Let me say it like this." He clasps his paws together in front of him. "She didn't want to hitch her cart to a stone."

I flick my ears. "But you said you got laid off after."

"Cimarine can smell the way the wind's a'blowin'. Like you can."

My curiosity compromised by tinges of guilt, I sit back. It's one thing to pretend to be a girl, but now I'm pretending I was dumped, and he's feeling this false empathy. Somehow that feels worse. I swish my tail slowly and pick up my drink. "All right. Why did you say it wouldn't last?"

He frowns, then his expression clears. He settles back as well. "Oh. I just think, y'know, if the boyfriend ain't up there with him, then where is he? If he's still in the closet, that won't last. I know a gay basketball player, him and his boyfriend are both in the closet and they're cool with it. But if one's out and one ain't..." He clucks his tongue.

"Who's the player?" I flick my ears forward.

"Can't say." For the first time, his smile looks smug. "Look, I know the gay thing is hard. Talked to a couple ex-athletes, that one current one."

"Did you go to Dev's conference expecting that announcement?"

He shakes his head. "Ain't paid much attention to him, honestly. But I'm local, and I thought, hey, what else am I gonna do this afternoon?" The whiff of scotch reminds me what his likely alternative was. "I guess you didn't expect it, either?"

"No." I catch myself before I smile. "I told you, it was a surprise."

"Any idea who the boyfriend is?"

Here I can't quite catch myself before saying, "No, none."

He peers at me, ears coming up. "But you have an idea. Someone he's talked about, gone out to see..."

I hide my expression behind my cup. “I don’t think it would be fair of me to make a guess.”

“You can smell which way the wind’s blowin’.”

“I…” My phone buzzes. I reach into the purse.

“Listen, Miss White.” He leans forward earnestly. “An exposé like that, it could get me a freelance contract, maybe a full-time gig.”

On my phone is a text from Dev: *4:28 pm: On way home c u thr?*

I text back, *On my way*, and replace the phone. “So sorry,” I say to Hal. “That’s my ride.” I pick up my latte and stand.

He stands with me. “Please,” he says. “You seem like a real nice lady. And you don’t owe him nothin’, right?”

Again, I tell myself: walk away. But I think about Brian and his little blog. I think about the media’s reaction, and how we wished we’d known someone who could deal with the media competently. Besides which, I remind myself, he knows Corcoran. “You don’t believe that,” I say, slowly, walking toward the door.

He falls into step beside me. “You know,” he says, “I could write up your story, too. Tabloids’d pay for that. ‘Dumped Ex-Girlfriend of Gay Football Player Tells All.’ Maybe a book deal, even.”

I have to laugh. “Why would I want to tell all?”

We’ve reached the door, the sun outside turning the coffee shop interior into dusky gloom. I set a paw on the door, but he stops me. “It’s a chance to have your story heard,” he says.

A cloud passes over the sun. The shadow outside lasts for just a moment. I flick my ears back and put on my demure female voice. “Nobody wants to hear my story.”

He smiles a wide, earnest smile. “Course they do.” His whiskers twitch. “I know I do.”

The hope in his dark brown eyes turns them bright, glimmers of reflected sun in them. He’s holding out a card, white with a smudge across one edge and a folded corner. “Think about it,” he says. “If his boyfriend ever does want to go public. And I’d throw

your story in as well."

Echoes of Morty flicker in my memory, standing on a cold field in Chikewa Falls talking about Dev coming to the pro football scouting combine. I wanted Morty to take me on as a scout, and he said: *if Miski comes, you can come too*.

I reach out and take the card delicately in two fingers. "I'll be in touch," I say, and raise the coffee cup. "Thanks for the drink, Mister Kinnel."

Chevali is usually too hot for me, but today the clouds are keeping the temperature down, and the sun'll be down before too long, anyway. The light evening breeze feels good, ruffling my dress. When I swish my tail, I attract the eyes of a wolf across the street, earning him a dig in the ribs from the lady he's with. I enjoy his reaction, but the real reason I'm swishing my tail is waiting at the end of my walk. My swishes pick up speed and frequency as I get closer to Dev's apartment, like a 'tiger counter.'

Yesterday when I was here, I was so proud of his performance in the game, so ashamed of the way I'd kept the secret from him about that one night with Brian, so anxious to make it up to him. Now I'm excited, but still anxious. I should put off worrying about the future. I can wait to return the messages on my phone. I don't want to think about anything but Dev.

The elevator smells like him, so I know he's home before he even comes near the door. My tail's wagging and I'm in danger of producing a bulge in my dress that I'm sure the designer never planned for. When he opens the door, we're wearing matching smiles, and I stop thinking about what my dress looks like.

"New outfit," he rumbles.

I touch his Chevali Firebirds polo shirt, pressing it against the muscular chest beneath. "Is that from the gay pro store?"

He yanks me in and slams the door. I throw my arms around him, but not before he's wrapped me in his powerful embrace. "Did I surprise you?"

Pressed tightly against him, my nostrils full of the smell of him,

I feel as taut and alive as a guitar string, thrumming with our music. “You surprised the hell out of me, tiger. But in a way...not really.”

“Not really?”

“You followed your heart. I didn’t expect it, but it’s perfectly you. That’s what I love about you.”

He sniffs, and squeezes me, without saying a word. I give a little “oof,” and wag my tail. “I think you surprised Caroll more.”

He shifts, pressing his nose down between my ears. I feel the warm exhalation through my fur. “She took off right after. I should call her.”

My paws slide down his back, cup his rear. “There’s something else you should do first.”

I feel his laughter all through me, in his stomach pressed to my chest, in puffs of air between my ears. “Shouldn’t we get dinner?”

“I mean, tell me what Coach said.”

He stops, pulls back, keeping his paws around me. I look up until my nose is almost touching his, his golden eyes searching mine. “You want to talk about Coach?”

I rub my stomach into his hardness. “We have all night, right?”

His tail whips around to rub behind my leg. “Fisher wanted to go to dinner. So did Charm.” He thinks about whether he wants to go, whether he wants to take me. I think about whether I want to go. “Oh, and Ogleby, I’m sure.”

I laugh. “Oh, God, you should’ve seen his expression. I almost thought you’d outed *him* in front of the whole world.”

“I only heard him when I first...” He pauses, remembering. “And then he was gone. But he called three times after.”

“Just realizing what opportunities await the agent of the first openly gay pro football player. Probably he got a bunch of calls.”

“Yeah.” He dips his muzzle a little further and kisses me. I arch up into it: a warm kiss, not passionate, although it could certainly turn that way, given that we’re both hard and pressed close. But no, it’s romantic, affectionate, familiar. I close my eyes and resist

the urge to lift my foot daintily.

His tongue tastes like beer. I grin as I pull back. “Coach took you to a bar?”

His ears flick. “He’s got a little fridge in his office. I didn’t know.”

“So I guess it went well.”

He moves to the couch. I trail behind, ears perked, and sit down against him. We face the window, the setting sun outside. “I think so.” He drapes an arm over my shoulder, fingers sliding beneath the neckline of my dress. “Hard to tell, with Coach, but I think so. At least it’s over now, one way or the other.”

He feels so relaxed that I almost don’t want to say anything, but I can’t help it. “Over?”

“Yeah. All the hiding, you know.”

They have nice sunsets here in the desert, glorious red and brilliant gold that it hurts to look at, and around the edges, deep violet shadows. I lean my head back so that Dev’s head blocks the brightest of the light. Up at the top of the window, I see the gleam of a star. “Sure, the hiding’s over, but now…you’re gonna be a target on the field, you know that.”

He rumbles. “The guys’ll back me up.”

“Some will. But you’re gonna have to fight twice as hard for the respect you used to have.”

He stares me down. “You think I can’t do it?”

“If I thought that,” I say, “I wouldn’t’ve let you back into my apartment three years ago.”

His fingers press a bit harder. I lean into him and rub my muzzle against his cheek. “You think you could’ve kept me out?” he says, softer.

“You think I couldn’t have?”

He laughs, again, and reaches his other paw over, sliding it under my dress and up my thigh. “I know what you foxes are all about.”

“Now you do.” My tail shivers; I can’t help shifting into his

touch.

Things might've gotten warmer then, except his stomach rumbles. I reach over to pat it. "Been a while since you had some food?"

"Almost as long as since I had some fox." He snuffles my ear. "We could order in."

I flick my ear, squirming at the tickling. "I think you deserve a nice dinner out."

He presses his muzzle closer, teasingly. "How about that spaghetti place across the street?"

"The one with your picture on the wall? It's good, but maybe something a little nicer. Like, with tablecloths." I reach over and grasp his tail, my ear getting very warm. If he keeps this up, I'll probably go back to the 'order out' suggestion.

But he relents, then. "Sure. You want to do dinner with someone else? Fisher, or Charm maybe? Or just us?"

My initial response was to have it be just us, but I'm reconsidering. "I've met Fisher, and it might be interesting to hear what he thinks."

Dev nods, slowly. "You want to change?"

"I don't think so."

He removes his paw from under the dress and smooths the fabric over my leg. "Liking the outfit?"

"Well, I was just thinking. I mean, now, if you go out with any guy who's not, you know, verifiably straight..."

"Oh." A little bit of tension creeps back into his body, against me. "I don't care if people know I'm with you."

"I know," I say. "But I'm not out at work yet, and I don't want all the attention. People would ask questions about how you were drafted, you know?" I feel him shift away from me. I know what he's thinking. "You made it on your own. But people will talk."

His ears come up. His nose brushes my cheek. "Okay." He takes his phone out, thumbs a number, and puts it to his ear. "Hi, Fish."

I can hear Fisher's voice, faintly. Dev asks if he's still up for

dinner, and I tune them out as they decide on a place, letting my eyes drift to the window. I can see more stars now, appearing in the sky one by one, as the sunset fades to a wash of orange and deep red. My paw creeps toward my purse and nudges aside the phone, reaching for the bottle of feminine scent.

"DID YOU GET ANY CALLS?" he asks on the way to the restaurant. It's a short drive away for him, a longer one for Fisher. Fisher's wife Gena is going to join us.

"Salim," I tell him. "And my folks." No sense worrying him about my job just yet. "And I met this reporter."

I tell him about Hal, his desperation for an exposé, and my thoughts that having a reporter on our side might be useful. I don't mention that he knows Corcoran. I don't want Dev to worry about being traded. "You don't have to call a press conference." Dev watches the road. "You don't have to come out at all, I guess."

I watch his muzzle, but he doesn't look resentful or angry. "Morty called, too. I'm gonna come out at work."

"Because of me?"

He looks at me so long I have to point him back to the road. "Not entirely," I say. "But it's past time."

His ears dip. "Sorry. I didn't think it'd affect you, too."

"It's okay, tiger," I say. "I pushed you enough, you can push back."

He grins, and his ears come up. "I like when we push back and forth."

The rest of the ride is innuendo-laced, to the point that I have to smooth out my dress again when we arrive at the restaurant. It's upscale Sonoran cuisine, expensive without being touristy, meaning you're actually paying for the food and not the décor. Dev says Fisher likes it because it's off the beaten path for the team, and the staff isn't likely to recognize Dev. Of course, there's a big

gap between “isn’t likely to” and “doesn’t,” as we learn when the weasel who guides us to a table in the back corner leans over and says, “You’re Devlin Miski, right?”

Dev hesitates, looks at me, and then says, “Yeah,” roughly.

The weasel smiles and gives him a thumbs-up. “How about a couple cocktails, on the house?”

“Oh.” We look at each other with surprise. “Sure,” Dev says. “I’ll have, um, the house specialty.”

“We do a lovely Top Shelf margarita.” Dev nods in assent, and the weasel turns to me. “And for your friend?”

“The white sangria,” I say, having had a chance to look at the cocktail menu. It’s an appropriately fruity drink.

He smiles and bows, leaving us alone. “Not too bad,” Dev says, waggling his eyebrows at me.

“If you could just play all your games in restaurants, you’d be set.” I switch back to my husky feminine voice, because we’re in public. Also because I like the effect it has on him.

His grin widens, his eyelids lower slightly. “Mm,” he says. “But you wouldn’t be. Unless you really like dressing up. Which I think you just might.”

I straighten my dress over the bra. “At least I’ve learned not to exaggerate my rack any more. I can get away with less padding and still look good.”

“Won’t hear me complaining,” he says. “Oh, speaking of tits, there’s Gena. Fisher must be parking.”

I stare at him, one eyebrow raised, ears back. He flicks his ears back. “Sorry,” he says. “I am rooming with Charm.”

“Not ’til you go out on the road again,” I murmur. “What else did you pick up from him?”

“Only terrible music.” He waves to Gena as she approaches.

“That I believe.” I give Gena a bright smile. She’s in good shape for a mother, a little round around the middle, but her loose blouse hides it well except when she sits. She’s wearing jeans, but a nice, classy pair. Her age shows more in the charcoal of her stripes,

subtle unless she's standing next to Dev's stark black pattern.

"Hi, Dev. And...Lee. I remember you." The smile she shares with her fellow tiger turns to an awkward pause. Her ears stay up, but the striped tail pauses and kinks behind her.

"Short for Wiley," I say, keeping my feminine voice.

"Fisher's parking the car." She brings out a little purse hanger and clips it to the side of the table, then hangs her purse from it.

I tilt my head to study the purse hanger. "That's smart. I should get one. I hate bumping into mine on the back of the chair."

Dev chuckles, but Gena doesn't. "I didn't expect..." She looks at me, then away.

"If I weren't dressed up," I say, "if Dev went out to dinner with a guy, now..."

"I saw the press conference," she says, and now she looks at me. "I guess...that makes sense. If you don't want anyone to know who he's dating."

I start to tell her I'm not out at work, but after Dev's big announcement, that sounds slightly ridiculous no matter how I phrase it, so I just stop. The waiter brings our cocktails just as Fisher gets to the table. He sits across from me, between Gena and Dev, and gives me a long look before his eyes drop to my chest. "Looks like you had a boob reduction," he says.

"Honey." Gena frowns at him.

"It's a joke." Fisher extends a paw. "Nice to see you again."

I clasp it. "A pleasure," I say. "Thanks for supporting Dev."

He and my tiger exchange a look. "Well, sure," he says. "Ain't much else to do, once you come down to it."

We make small talk while looking at the menus. Dev and I let Fisher order a bunch of small plates for us, because it all sounds delicious: prosciutto-wrapped dates, marinated octopus, spicy raw chicken, flaky mushroom pastries. And when the waiter's gone, Fisher leans back and surveys Dev. "So it's out. You're out."

"Yeah." Dev looks abashed. "Coach says he's still going to start me. 'Practice tomorrow, business as usual.' But he's gonna limit the

media as much as he can."

"It's gonna be a circus," Fisher says.

I lean forward. "Are you going to be able to protect him? On the field, I mean."

Fisher huffs. "He's gotta protect himself."

"You can help."

"No, he's right," Dev says. "I know they're gonna be coming for me."

"Well," Fisher says, "she's—I mean, he's right too. You gotta take care of yourself, but if we stand up for ya, it'll stop a lot quicker'n if we don't."

"You make it sound like he's a criminal." Gena tries to say it lightly, but her voice breaks on the last word.

Fisher and Dev look at each other. I say, "Different is criminal enough. Guys are gonna think if they get beat by a faggot, it makes them a faggot too. At least, that's what their teammates'll say."

Gena flinches at the word 'faggot,' while Fisher nods, slowly. Dev's looking at him, and I'm sure they're both thinking of Tony Calhoun, the gay bear Fisher played with a decade or more ago. But I'm not supposed to know about that, so I keep my muzzle shut. Fisher turns from Dev to look at me. "About right," he says.

"I wrote a paper in college," I say with enough hubris that I'm clearly mocking myself.

Dev snorts, and then Fisher laughs, too. Gena joins in a moment later, and the ice is broken. I feel confident enough, a few moments later, to ask Fisher about Corcoran. "I heard he's a Republican, gives to a lot of Family Focus organizations."

He anticipates the question, answering even as Dev's frown deepens. "I only met him a couple times, but he always does right by his players. Macer, you didn't know him—before your time," he nods to Dev. "Backup safety. Had a drug problem. Corcoran paid for his rehab, flew his mom out, because the kid was serious about getting straight."

Would Corcoran do the same thing for Dev? "Macer's not here

any more," I say. "Did he get traded?"

"No." Fisher spreads his paws. "Couldn't keep up, and got cut."

Dev drums fingers on the tabletop, but Fisher's reply makes me feel better. Dev can totally keep up. Fisher adds, "He got straight, though. Assistant defensive coach in some college somewhere now."

"In a few years, maybe he'll be coaching Bradley," Gena says. She and Fisher exchange a smile.

We ask more about their kids. As they open up, they venture questions about our relationship in the way that straight people ask their first gay friends. Lots of pauses, implied euphemisms. "How long have you two been...together? How often do you...see each other?"

I've been through that more often than Dev, so I take it in stride and he follows my lead. We know where our boundaries are, which of course means I like to push them, saying things like "So, does Fisher get all worked up after a game?" to Gena, at which she looks away, and Dev scolds me, and Fisher just grins. But even Gena loosens up after a few glasses of wine, and soon we're laughing comfortably about the latest terrible movie, and Fisher and Dev are reporting some locker-room chatter that Gena and I find hilarious.

The food isn't spectacular, but it's solid, and actually the octopus is really good. After a third glass of sangria, I excuse myself, and head for the restrooms. I have the door to the 'damas' room half-open when I hear a throat being cleared behind me.

I turn and see Gena. She's staring at me and at the door. I raise my eyebrows. We stand for a moment looking at each other, and then she folds her arms, her long tail twitching. "Go on."

"There's plenty of stalls," I say.

"Go on." And it's clear she's not going to move. So I go in, do my business as quickly as I can, and come out. She walks in stiffly, without a word.

"I need to go too," Dev says as I return. But of course he and

Fisher won't go together. So Dev gets up, I sit down, and Fisher watches Dev walk away.

"Good recommendation," I say. "I like the food and the sangria."

Fisher leans across the table. "After Dev left, Coach had a talk with the team," he says quickly. "Told us he wasn't gonna stand for any horseshit around Dev."

"Good." But his attitude is making me apprehensive. My ears flick.

"But he also said he didn't want nobody thinkin' they couldn't come talk to him about problems. If there's legit problems, he said, he'll take care of 'em."

"Legit problems?"

"Yeah," Fisher says. "Like...hi, honey."

Gena sits back down, sweeping her tail around behind her. She doesn't look at me, not at first. So I decide to take the high ground. "Sorry," I say. "I hadn't realized you'd be uncomfortable..."

"It's okay." She's a little more sober. "I hadn't really thought it all the way through. I was thinking of you as...well."

I incline my muzzle. "I'll take that as a compliment."

That provokes a nervous giggle from her. Fisher says, "Yeah, no question about who wears the pants."

"Honey." Gena slaps his arm, lightly. "Don't get personal."

"It was a joke," he says, frowning slightly.

But I'm stuck on what Fisher'd said, about legit problems. Samuelson had to say what he said, because his first priority is making sure his team is in shape to contend for a championship, not making sure that the first openly gay football player gets a chance to play. Have some of the team been coming to him with non-legit problems? Dev's told me about Colin, the fox cornerback who doesn't approve of his lifestyle, but are there others he doesn't know about? Are there whispers that could grow to shouts?

It comes down to what it's always come down to. If Dev can keep playing at the level he has been, he'll have a place on the

team. If he can ignore the distractions of the media, of his teammates, of the other players on the field, he'll be fine. The moment he slips, even just a bit, then he'll be in trouble.

2

Hi, Mom (Dev)

Lee's kind of quiet as we leave Fisher and Gena, after a chat outside the restaurant during which Gena promises to stay in touch with Lee, and they exchange phone numbers even though I'm not sure either of them wanted to. I think maybe Lee's just thinking about Fisher's joke, which was nothing compared to what the guys were giving me in the locker room after the press conference. The funniest thing about that was how much tension had been broken. When I was trying to hide it, even when I'd told the team, I always worried that one of them would slip and tell someone else about me. Or say something intentionally. Now, it's no big deal. I know there's still some guys on the team who don't really like me—well, don't like gay people—but they weren't around.

It's weird saying 'gay people' about myself, because to me, 'gay people' were always those guys in leather straps in the parades, or the flamey queers who always sneered at you. They were all horny, all the time, and it didn't really matter to them if you liked them or not. And that's not me. But that's not Lee, either. And it's not his friend Salim. So maybe it's not the term 'gay people' that's wrong, it's the way I think about it.

And the way the other guys on the team think about it. So I tell Lee, "Fish really helped me get the team on my side."

"Mm." He just nods and then turns his long, slender muzzle, ears cupped in my direction. "What'd he do?"

“Oh, Aston said something to me about ‘that was very brave,’ and everyone was starting to get all serious, like it’s an after-school special and I’m the kid who learns the special lesson. All quiet and stuff. But when I came out of Coach’s office, Fisher said, ‘Dev, we got a question for you. Who’s hotter, me or Gerrard?’”

He snorts at that, but grins. “I hope you said Gerrard. He is one hot coyote.”

I kind of glare at him. “Well, they’re all looking at me, but Fisher’s grinning and even Gerrard, rolling his eyes, looks like he thinks it’s funny. I still got this nervous feeling, like how do I answer this? Do I tell ’em that just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I think about fucking them?”

“I thought you told ’em that.”

“These are football players. We’re not fast learners.”

He leans his muzzle into his paw. “So?”

“I said, ‘Neither of you. I’d take Charm any day. First off, he’s got a way better bod, and secondly, he’s a kicker. He’s used to gettin’ it between the uprights.’”

That gets a nice laugh out of him. “They liked that?”

I can’t suppress a self-satisfied grin. “It’s an old kicker joke. Charm whacked me on the back so hard I thought my teeth came loose. Then the guys started arguing about whether a good pair of tits was more important than a nice ass and tail. And oh god, Gerrard would not say anything, and they actually started poking at him more than me for a bit, before he left, and he just kept saying, “I’m married.” And then Brick said something about his wife being nothing like the girls he gets on the road, and Gerrard just grinned and said, “it’s all the same in the dark.””

“Really?”

I nod. “It was great. Aston says, all serious like he’s really not sure about this, ‘Is that right, Dev?’ And I say, ‘Fuck, no.’”

He shakes his head. “I mean about Gerrard getting girls on the road.”

“Oh. Yeah, I thought I told you about that. There’s always girls

outside road games."

"You told me that, but..." He looks straight ahead at the road, watching as I make a turn onto the main street leading back to downtown Chevali. "I didn't think it was the married guys."

He sounds annoyed, but I'm not sure why. "Depends. I saw Gerrard go off with this lioness once, but I don't pay much attention to that. The guys talk about getting their dicks sucked..." It occurs to me why he might be upset. "Hey, I never...I mean, I barely noticed the girls."

"I didn't think you did."

He says it calmly enough that I can tell that that's not what he's angry or worried about. So I figure it's one of those things I can't help, and I leave it. "You want coffee or anything? I don't really have anything in the apartment."

"Sure. Just not—"

"I know, I know." I point up ahead. "There's a Coffee Bean. Caroll turned me on to them."

He grins. "That'll do."

They know me there, so when the fennec behind the counter sees me, there's five or ten minutes of questions about the press conference and if people are being nice to me. The lemur working the espresso machine, with ears and nose full of piercings, gives me a big grin and says the drinks are on the house. When I say that Lee's with me, the lemur says, "Ah, now we know she's just a friend, hey?" and I grin and nod. They don't charge me for Lee's vanilla latte, or my sweet tea, but I tip them a twenty.

"Apricot tea?" Lee murmurs on our way out, the staff calling good-byes to my wave.

"I'm in the mood for something sweet." That gets an arched eyebrow and a discreet flick of the tail that he knows I see.

Hot drinks in paw, we get back to the apartment and curl up on the couch again, sipping the drinks, flipping channels and not really seeing anything. Whatever was bothering him is out of his mind now; he's perky and chatty, and his paws are nice and active.

Neither of us feels much urgency, though his flight is as early as my practice, and I'll have to drop him off at the airport on the way there. It's our night.

Even though nothing between us has changed, I feel like he sees me differently. Maybe that's just me—I feel different,too. The press conference today made my commitment to him stronger—or, rather, it showed him how strong it was. I think he always felt in the back of his mind that as long as my secret wasn't public, I could walk away from him. The funny thing is, I didn't introduce him as my boyfriend, so I still could walk away just as easily. But somehow, we both know that doesn't matter.

"Do you want me to tell people about you?" I ask him.

We're still on the couch, though probably about half an hour from bed. My shirt's off, his dress is undone at the top, and we're moving our paws through each other's fur. "About me specifically?" His black ears flick toward me. "Or just about your boyfriend?"

"I told people I'm seeing someone. They're going to ask."

"They did ask."

I trace claws through his stomach fur. "Morty?"

He's quiet, rubbing my chest, his eyes drifting thoughtfully away. "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"He can't fire you." He doesn't answer. "Can he?"

Lee shrugs, resting his head on my shoulder. "Don't want to think about it now. I'll keep you posted."

I kiss his ear. "I know you can take care of yourself." I was going to say, 'but if you need me,' but as I say it I realize I don't have to.

His tail wags more quickly, a sensual back-and-forth against my thigh. I trap it in my paw and hold its wriggling tightly, letting a claw tease around underneath it. My estimate of half an hour might be off by a few minutes. He tilts his muzzle, a sparkle in his eye below the reflection of the stars from the window, and talks in his Lauren Bacollie voice. "Maybe I can take care of you now, too."

“I’m sure you can do that.” I breathe across his ears, to watch them flick, and pull him closer to me by his rear. “Me being gay and all, now.”

“I was quite overcome in that press conference.” He says it with a slight smile, which fades as he finishes.

“But not surprised?” I nose his ear.

He flicks the ear, the smile returning full-force. “I told you, I knew you could do it. I didn’t know you would. It was a brave thing to do, and I don’t mean that in an after-school special kind of way. I mean it in an I’m-proud-of-you kind of way.”

“Yeah, well.” I grumble gruffly, because I don’t want to get all choked up before going to bed. “You know, like you kept telling me, someone had to do it. I was just sick of waiting for someone else to have the balls.”

Normally, there, he’d slip his paw between my legs and tell me how he knows I have balls. But he doesn’t, he just nods and hugs me. “I’m still worried about you,” he says, his voice muffled by my fur. “But it was a good thing you did, and whatever of it was meant for me…nobody ever did anything like that for me before.”

“Oh, foxy, dammit.” He tilts his muzzle again. I’m kinda frowning, growling now, because I know I’m going to say it and I can’t stop myself. “It’s all for you. And for me. For us.”

He doesn’t say anything, but he sniffles and swallows back emotion so thick I can feel it coming off him, and the shifting of his body against me is the best thing in the world.

We lie there for a few quiet, lovely seconds, and then I pick him up, cradling him against me, and stand up. He puts his arms around my chest and neck and curls his tail around my leg when I let it go. We stand there for a moment, while his black fingers trace the black stripes along my neck. Then I carry him into the bedroom, nice and slow, and kiss him between his ears as I drop him on the bed. And that moment, right there, I’m sure I did the right thing.

He’s out of his dress in a minute. I’ve unbuckled my pants, still

standing, and I'm just lowering them when the phone in the pocket goes off.

The new phone I got after throwing the old one against the wall has some neat features. One of them is a privacy mode that only allows certain numbers to ring through. I had the clerk set it with exactly two numbers, and one of them is currently in a purse on the living room table. My heart freezes for a moment.

Lee doesn't know this, of course. He's still helping pull my pants down, on all fours on the bed. He ignores the phone like he assumes I'm going to, pressing his paw against the hardness between my legs. I've reached down for the phone and pressed Talk, but he doesn't notice until I say, "Hi, Mom."

She's quiet for a second, the length of time it takes Lee to stare up at me. Then she says, "How did you know it was me?"

Because I knew Dad wouldn't call me. "I, uh, guess you guys saw."

She exhales. "Oh, Devlin. You couldn't have talked to us first?"

Lee tilts his head. A smile grows across his muzzle. I try to step back, but he's got my boxers and I'm afraid to fight too hard to get away from him in case I make some kind of noise on the phone. I say, "No," to Mom while glaring down to make it clear I'm talking to him, too. He smiles sweetly back and licks his lips, slowly. "You know why not."

"Listen, Devlin," she says, as Lee's paw forces my boxers down over my full, hard cock, "if they made you say those things—"

"If who made me say them?" I try to twist away, but he yanks me closer. His whiskers brush up my length. I shiver.

“Those liberals.” She doesn’t say it with the conviction my father does.

“Mom, h-how would liberals make me say things like that?” The stutter happens when Lee wraps his long fingers around the base of my sheath. I tug back, shaking my head, but he holds on,

and when I step back I almost drag him off the bed. I try to swat at him with my free paw.

"Devlin, your father's upset. I think if you could come home and talk to him, that would..."

It takes me a minute to realize she's trailed off, as Lee is now breathing wetly on my shaft and it's getting hard to focus on anything but the warm shivers and the red-and-white curve of his rear, with his tail swishing alluringly above it. "That would what, Mom?"

"Just for an evening." She sounds distracted. "It would be good for the neighbors to see you come home."

I squirm away from Lee's tongue, panting. He pulls my shaft to his mouth and gets his lips around it before I pull away again. "What do the neighbors have to do wi-ith it?"

"They talk, you know."

Lee sucks. I bite my lip. "Can I talk to Dad?"

At that, Lee looks up at me, his ears back. I mouth, "Sorry," and look as apologetic as I can. He cups my sac and then retreats back to the bed, lying on his back so his own hard shaft is lying exposed on his stomach fur. His eyes stare up at the ceiling, but his ears are cupped to listen to me.

"He's gone to bed," Mom says, even though it's barely ten o'clock where they are. I didn't think Dad would talk to me, but I couldn't help trying.

"I've got practice all week." I can hear the flatness of my voice, but I can't seem to do anything about it. "But the week after that is a bye. I'll have to come in Friday to work out, but I could go up there Tuesday. If you think it would be worth it."

"Please try." But she doesn't sound very hopeful.

I tell her I'll make the reservations and will let them know when I'm coming up. There isn't much to say after that. She tells me that Gregory's doing well, his new cub—my nephew—is fine and healthy, his wife Marta is good. I tell her it's cooling down in Chevali, and they should come see my place sometime. She says

they'd love to.

By the time I hang up, my arousal is pretty much gone, only its memory keeping my shaft from pulling all the way back into my sheath. Lee flips over onto his stomach and brushes a finger there, along the ridge of fur. I don't stop him, but I don't react, either. He gets up on his knees and puts his arm around me, and when he lifts his muzzle to mine, I do pull away.

"Not really in the mood," I grumble.

He pulls me back. "I know that, stud," he says, and just holds me, touching his muzzle to my lips and then withdrawing it. "C'mere and sit down."

We sit together on the bed, me with my legs over the side and him cross-legged beside me. He waits for me to say something, and I want to be angry at him, but I can't. "How did you deal with your mother?" I say finally.

"Persistence, and then separation." His tail curls around my back, comforting. "I got tired of waiting for her to deal with things and move on. It's harder 'cause I'm not in their faces with it. After that time you came to P.J.'s, I thought she'd realize that she can't ignore this forever. But whenever I went back, if I so much as mentioned you, she did that high-pitched talking-about-something-else thing again. So I never call them, because she might answer."

"You don't miss them?"

He shrugs. "They don't miss me."

"They have to miss you. You're their son."

"They don't call." He sighs. "They haven't disowned me or anything. I just don't have that much in common with them anymore."

I can't imagine that. How can he not have anything in common with his parents? I have to word this carefully, though. Things started to go bad with his family a couple years ago, after I walked up to them in a restaurant and introduced myself as his boyfriend. He's told me over and over, softly and sharply, lovingly and frustratedly, that it's not my fault. "What about all the hard times

growing up? The family vacations?"

"The hardest time we had was when we had to downgrade our winter vacation hotel to one without a beach view. My father didn't play sports with me. I didn't have a brother to get in trouble with. We had okay times, but I changed and they didn't change with me." His shrug seems melancholy to me. "I don't care. I've got you."

"I wish I didn't care."

He puts his arm around my shoulders, with difficulty. I relax them, to make it easier. "You don't wish that."

"No." I hug him back. I know it must hurt him to have lost his family, on some level. "Come home with me."

"What?" His blue eyes stare into mine, his mouth partly open.

"Seriously. When they get to know you, they'll like you. They'll have to." It all makes perfect sense. All they know is me, from my childhood and adolescence. In order to really know me as an adult, or at least a more mature adolescent, they have to know Lee. He's part of my life now.

"Shouldn't they get to know you again first?" he says slowly.

"It won't be like with your mom," I say. I won't let it be like that. "Mom will love you, and you can talk football with Dad."

He snorts. "I'm sure that'll just make him forget all about the fact that I'm your boyfriend."

"Not right away. But you're good with people." He looks doubtful. "Seriously. You can talk football with him better than I ever could. I memorized some names, but he knows games and drafts. He'll be impressed you're a scout. He's a huge Dragons fan."

He grins and scoots back, stretching his long foxy body out on the bed. His shaft is partway back into its sheath, but he doesn't make any motion toward it. He slides himself gracefully under the covers and pats the bed beside him. "Let's get some sleep. We can talk about it in the morning."

I crawl in beside him. He turns his back to me as I press up against him and drape an arm over his chest, my body surrounding

his. He turns his muzzle back for a good-night kiss, and our breath mingles for a moment. Then I reach out for the switch and turn off the light, and bury my nose between his ears, his tail squirming against my stomach.

IN THE MORNING, we talk briefly on the way to the airport. He's still not convinced, and I confess I'm starting to have second thoughts. Even so, I don't see a reason he shouldn't come home with me. "Look," I say, as I'm pulling around the curve to the airport, dodging shuttle busses, "sooner or later you're going to have to meet them, right?"

"Right," he says, and I pounce on that.

"So why not now? Get it over with quickly, right?"

"I'm just not sure..." He trails off.

"You'll be fine." Stopped at a light, I look at his muzzle. "You're not hyper-activist guy all the time."

He turns and raises an eyebrow. "I was going to say, I'm not sure we have to do this that early."

"Really?"

The eyebrow lowers. He laughs. "Well, I was worried about my activist side, too. But like you said, I don't have to be 'on' all the time." He grins just a little, just enough to relax me.

The light changes. I turn and roll forward. "I don't want to hide you. If you're there, they won't be worried about who I'm dating."

"No, they'll know they hate me."

I force a laugh. "They won't hate you."

"They won't think I'm some evil fox who corrupted you?" I can see the flicking of his ears out of the corner of my eye. My chuckle trails off as I realize that it might not be that farfetched for Dad. Lee goes on. "I guess they might not be as upset with you then, huh?"

"We just haven't really talked in a while," I say. "Phone and

stuff, but no serious talks. Once we sit down, it'll work itself out. We're family, right?"

"Family doesn't always mean you get along," he says.

"It doesn't always mean you don't."

He doesn't answer, but his ears stay down, and I know he's thinking about his family. I leave him to those thoughts, talking myself into my plan in my head. It'll just take us sitting down as a family, and maybe they won't want Lee included at first, but that's okay. We haven't sat down like that in a long time. Holidays, phone calls, it's all surface stuff. Now that I can talk to them about this part of my life, they'll understand.

At the airport, Lee takes his bag out of the back seat while I get out and walk around to the side. A hyena in uniform starts to tell us to move along, then gets distracted as another car tries to stop in the middle of a moving traffic lane. Lee takes advantage of the chaos to slip his arm around me, a one-armed "guy hug" that we hold a bit longer than buddies would. He looks up at me for a moment before pulling away.

"Fox," I say, "I really want you to come."

A smile breaks over his muzzle. "Okay," he says. "Come stay with me the night before and we'll drive out there Tuesday."

My tail curls as I let him go, my smile getting wider. "Deal."

We stand there for about ten seconds just smiling at each other, until he says, "You need to get to practice."

"See you in a week." I squeeze his shoulder and he manages somehow to pat my butt while making it casual and not a big deal, and nobody around seems to have noticed. Fuck, he's good at that. I watch his own rear moving below his swinging tail, and lean against the car.

"Hey!" The hyena barks at me. "You can't stay there."

I raise a paw, get back in, and drive on. I already miss him. I want him to be at the apartment when I come home from practice, but I can't ask him to leave his job.

The sun's staring me full in the face as it comes up, all the way

from the airport down to Hughes Stadium. I pull into the players' lot just as another SUV pulls in behind me and parks to my right. Carson gets out, the other linebacker who starts with me and Gerrard. A leopard about my height, he's faster than I am, but not as bulked. He wasn't around the locker room for my big moment yesterday, but the only thing I'm worried about is if he thinks coming out will distract me from playing football.

When he walks up beside me, he aims a punch at my shoulder like he always does, and grins when I swat it away. We mock-spar for a few seconds, and then he says, "New week, new game."

His eyes glint at me. "I'm ready," I say. "Bring it on."

"Damn straight."

If it were anyone else, I'd think that was a subtle dig at me. But Carson doesn't glance to see if I get it, he doesn't act self-conscious or smug; he just walks in with me and heads to his locker, a few over from mine. I glance around at the rest of the team. Everything looks normal.

My coming out wasn't news to any of them; I told them a couple weeks ago in a private meeting. The guys who had a problem with me Sunday still have a problem with me on Tuesday. I spot Colin, the fox who's risen to backup cornerback in his rookie year, dressing on his side of the locker room. He doesn't look my way. Some of the guys dressing near him do, suspicious glares more pointed than they had been before the press conference.

I ignore them as best I can, but it occurs to me that I should go thank the guys who did stand behind me. So once I get my uni on, I walk over to Ty Nakamura, the fox who's already starting for us as the third wideout. His nickname in college was "Fish," which he never explained, but because Fisher already uses that name, I just call him "Ty."

Half-dressed, he looks like a bigger, more muscular Lee. But that's not enough to turn me on. Never has been. I give his arm a punch. "Hey, I never said, but thanks."

"Ah." He waves the thanks away. "Next time you're gonna

come out on TV, let me know and I'll wear somethin' more fashionable."

I grin. "Once is all it takes." I jerk my head over to Colin and his crew. "What's with them?"

"Whatever. Fuck a hundred girls and it's cool, but one guy and suddenly it's all..." He rolls his eyes.

"Seems worse today."

He shrugs. "Who knows what's up their ass?" Then his ears flatten and he looks around. When he talks again, he lowers his voice. "Hey, uh...I know it ain't my business, but...you're the guy, right?"

"What?" The question comes out of nowhere. I'm torn between laughing and shoving him. Neither one seems like a good option.

"I mean, you know, you...do the fuckin', right?"

"Jesus." Now I do laugh. "Yeah, so what?"

His ears go up. "Nah, nothing." He grins and pulls his shirt on.

The morning practice is all just drills, running stations, learning plays, working with your position coach. I expect the stands to be full of people come to watch us, but they're emptier than usual. Steez, the cougar who's my linebackers coach, tells me Coach Samuelson closed our practices this week. Worried about distractions. That makes me self-conscious because I know the distraction he was worried about is me. But I put that aside and do my best to concentrate on football.

The coaches have been reviewing film over the weekend. I should've been studying it yesterday, but I was occupied with telling the world that I like guys. So I follow Steez attentively as he coaches the linebackers through the plays we had trouble with, because most of the trouble centers on me. It's not my first year in the league, but it's my first at linebacker, and even though I picked it up well, I have a ways to go to catch up with Gerrard and Carson.

One play in particular is a little tricky because we haven't used it yet. It's in the drills now because of Millenport, our Sunday

opponent, so I focus hard on it. Even so, I keep half-stepping to the wrong side before remembering where I'm supposed to be going, so that Steez growls at me, his tail lashing, "Corey learns this play in half hour! Head in game!"

"I've got my head in the game," I mutter to myself. For the first time all season, I really feel free to concentrate on football, no worries about being found out or about what Lee's doing. And the mention of Corey, I'm sure, is meant to remind me that the cougar whose position I've taken will be back from his injury in two or three weeks, and I'd better have this thing memorized by then.

By noon, I'm at least stepping to the right side every time. Even Steez is pleased, his ropy tail calm, sending us off to lunch with a smile. Afternoon is a film session, and then basic exercises until dinner. I take ten minutes to check my voicemails after lunch.

The mailbox is full. But the first six are all from Ogleby, becoming progressively more panicked because I haven't called him back.

So I call, and man, if I thought his voice was squeaky before, that was nothing. "Dev, listen, before you dump me, gimme a chance, I got six sponsors lined up and that's three-quarters of a mil on the table up front."

"Ogleby," I say, "settle down."

"I know I walked out on you but that was just because I knew my phone was gonna be ringin' off the hook and it was, babe, it was. Twelve calls! I weeded out the ones I knew you wouldn't want but we can call 'em back, and I got two interviews lined up for ya, and the Today Show called, they want you on next week, so I got you a plane ticket from Chevali—"

"I can't."

"Dev, sweetie, I know your schedule. Come on! You're not playing next week! A whole week to build up your brand! You can't pass this up. I've been in this business thirty years—"

"No, I mean, I've got other plans next week."

"Okay, look, for you, because it's you, I…" He takes a deep

breath in. “I’m gonna drop my fee one point. Just for this set of deals. Come on, that’s an extra seventy-five hunnerd in your pocket, Dev, babe.”

“I mean it. I can’t do next week. I have to go home.”

“Go home? Go home? You can go home anytime, didn’t you hear me, this is the *Today Show*!” I try to interrupt him, but I can’t get a word in. “You leave Wednesday night, they put you up in a swanky hotel, you do the show Thursday, bada bing. What could be easier?”

“Not doing it could be easier.” I’d wanted to stay home longer, but two days is better than nothing. And if Lee could come with me to Port City, it might be a nice vacation. Celebrate him meeting my parents, unwind from the trip. I have a creeping feeling that we will need some unwinding.

“You’re crazy! Listen, you’re doing it, or, or, you find a new agent.” I don’t say anything. “No, I didn’t mean that, but please, you gotta do it.”

“All right. Jeez, shut up.” I press my fingers to my eyes. I’d forgotten about the headache I get whenever I talk to him.

“You’re gonna be great.” He’s back to his normal register again. “You’re gonna be at the Port City ‘D’ Hotel, it’s right on the water, it’s beautiful.”

“You already booked my room?”

“Hey, I know you, I knew you’d do the right thing. That’s what you did Monday, right? The right thing. There’s all kinds of contracts waiting here for you, commercials to do, there’s a Chevali nightclub and a Yerba Sporting Goods store and…get this…a national chain of sportswear! Ultimate Fit!”

“Great.” I look around and notice that there’s nobody in the locker room. Shit. I’m late for film. “I gotta go.”

“Sure, kid, no problem, just tell me if you’re good with the Ultimate Fit guys, because they want to send a crew out on Thursday.”

“Jesus, Ogleby, I can’t do it Thursday, I have practice.”

“They just want to film you practicing. So is that okay?”

“No!” My tail lashes back and forth. I take a breath. “Goodbye.”

“Okay, but wait—”

Sometimes the only way to end a conversation with Ogleby is to hang up on him. I still have like forty voicemails on it, but I don’t have any more time. So I toss the phone in my locker and run down to film. Of course, everyone else is already there, and when I open the door, Coach Samuelson says, “Thanks for joining us, Miski. Twenty-five hundred if you’re late to a film session again.”

There’s muttering from a few of the players, but I don’t see who. I slink into my chair and avoid meeting anyone’s eye, focusing on watching the plays from the previous week’s game. As we go through them, though, I get into it. I want to watch my interception again, but we only look at it once. I can see through the helmet the intensity in my eyes and I remember the feeling of knowing, being perfectly in tune with the game as I step in front of the coyote and pluck the ball out of the air. My fingers flex as we watch, gripping the memory of the football. It felt great. I’m hungry for more.

Coach Samuelson says, in his lupine growl, “Good anticipation, Miski.” Then we move on to the three completions they made to that same coyote, and though I tackled him two out of three times, Steez points out where I could’ve swatted the ball away.

It’s not just me, though. On every play the coaches run through who hit their assignment, who was slow to the play, who showed good reflexes. There’s at least three of us mentioned on every play. By four-thirty, we’re mentally exhausted, ready to do some lifting and let it soak in for more drills tomorrow.

Fisher and I spot each other in the weight room. We don’t talk much, except when he skips the shoulder presses, flexing his left shoulder. “Musta slept on it wrong,” he says.

I try to remember whether he took a hit to the shoulder on Sunday. “Did you see the trainer?”

He glares at me. “I just slept on it wrong. Do your presses.”

We only have to be here ’til seven, and after that we can leave if we want. They bring in protein bars (approved by the league) in case we want to stay, and I always do. Sometimes I just run for an hour on the treadmill. Tonight, Gerrard and Carson want to do an extra hour of practice, so we grab some guys from the practice squad and run out to the field.

I don’t think the practice squad guys would have been as eager for just me or Carson, but the smarter ones know how much Gerrard talks to the coaches. Being seen working your ass off for the team when you don’t have to scores you points. Sometimes, when the three of us practice, we just do two-on-one, one of us defending while the other two play quarterback and wide receiver. If we can get practice squad guys, though, that works better ’cause it allows us to work with each other, which is what we really need to work on at this point. Also Carson and I suck at throwing the ball.

So five practice squad guys play offense, and we defend with a couple more guys in front of us for a defensive line. Gerrard tells the practice QB to run basic plays and improvise when he wants to. It’s exciting for me, almost like a real game, ’cause I don’t know what’s coming. They get some of the same rush. When they beat us for a score, they whoop and trash-talk. When we stuff ’em, we taunt ’em right back. And Gerrard, in between coaching me and Carson, points out to the squad guys things they could be doing better.

By the time the session ends, we’re all hot and panting, even in the cool evening air. Still trash-talking, shoving and play-punching each other, we head to the locker room and strip out of our uniforms.

Ever since I came out to the team, I’ve taken to waiting to take my shower until most of the team is done. Gerrard and Carson don’t mind, but I don’t know about the practice guys. Anyway, Fisher’s still in the weight room, and I wanted to ask him how to

deal with reporters. My voicemail box is full again.

When he finally gets out, a few of the backup guys who stayed for extra work are showering, too. I hesitate, but Fisher just jerks his head at me to follow him in. We grab showers on the empty side of the room. Across from us are Pike and Kodi, a polar and brown bear who are backups on the defensive line. The only other guy in the shower is the otter who's our backup kick returner, a little ways down. I know Pike and Kodi from when I was a backup and we worked out together with the second team. They're both huge, half a foot taller than me and probably seventy-five pounds heavier. Pike, actually, backs up Fisher's position. He's stronger, but not as fast, even though he's probably eight years younger.

They mostly ignore us. Pike's talking about how much he benched this week, so loudly everyone in the shower can hear. Kodi's mumbled responses are only audible to the polar bear, who keeps the conversation going. The otter finishes up and walks out while we're talking.

I tune them out while I ask Fisher's advice in talking to the media. "Just be bland," he tells me. "Tell them everything's great. Talk in roundabout ways. Don't tell them anything hard and factual, because they'll take it out of context. 'The team is supportive'—probably you shouldn't say 'behind me'—and 'I love the fans,' always get that one in there, and 'it's all about what I do on the field.' That oughta be good enough for 'em. Soon enough they'll get bored."

I feel a little bit of a pang. There's some panic in having all these people after me, sure, but it's a nice feeling, in a way. "What if they ask me about," I glance at the bears and lower my voice. "Lee?"

Fisher shrugs. "Same thing. Bland, positive." He looks up at the bears as they turn off the shower.

Pike raises a paw to us, walking by, and nods to Fisher. "Hey, your shoulder doin' okay, there?"

"It's fine." Fisher lingers a moment longer, staring after them.

Pike's eyes pass over me on their way back to Kodi, walking behind as the brown bear makes a remark about going to the Sea Shack for dinner. Kodi does hesitate in the middle of his sentence as he goes past me, but only for a second. If my coming out bothered him, he's making an effort to keep it hidden. I know he's never said anything bad about me, anyway.

It's nice that they feel comfortable, treating me like just another teammate. Pike paying attention to Fisher's workout, though, is a little obsessive. Sure, if Fish is going to be injured, Pike needs to be ready. Still, it feels predatory to me. I know guys do what they have to to stay in the league here, and getting a starting position adds years to your career, even if it's through a lucky break, like mine. I just don't like him sniffing around Fisher like a vulture. Not all the backup guys do it. I didn't do it with Corey.

Back home, it's another dinner of pizza and a night of video games. I call Lee and tell him about the Today Show, after telling him how Ogleby almost cost me twenty-five hundred bucks. He's excited—about the show, not the near-fine—and says he'll be happy to come to Port City with me. "I'm pretty sure it'll be positive coverage," he says. "They're usually pro-gay. Or at least neutral."

"I hope so." I hadn't even thought about that. "Did you check my league e-mail box?"

"Yeah. Mostly junk, a couple interesting letters. I'll forward them on to you."

"Thanks. How was work?"

"Alex and Paul were talking about it." He sounds like he's going to say more, then doesn't.

"Did Morty?"

Now he sighs. "He was with the GM all day. Our losing streak has gone from unfortunate to embarrassing. I don't think the right fix is to fire the scouts, but they get desperate when they get embarrassed. Heard from your parents any more?"

Should I follow up on his work situation? My days as a

Hilltown Dragon, suffering through loss after loss, are not so remote that I don't feel a twinge of sympathy. Maybe later. "No, but I wouldn't expect it. My brother hasn't called either."

"Gregory the hotshot lawyer?"

"He has a TV commercial now, did I tell you? He hasn't e-mailed either. I'm sure my parents told him." I pause. "Any...reaction online?"

My phone beeps. I take it away from my ear and glance at it, then put it back.

Lee's heard the click. "Who is it?"

"Ogleby. He'll leave a message."

Lee laughs. "I can hear him drooling from here."

"Please don't make me picture that."

"Fair enough." He pauses. "Online—well, Corcoran released a quick statement. Just said you're a member of the Firebirds family and he has no plans to trade you. Bland and positive."

"Better than nothing."

"Much. You keep up your end of the deal. Be a good player. Don't miss any more meetings."

"Steez would kill me."

"At least it sounds like nobody else on the team will."

"Fisher's looking out for me."

"Yeah, I'm more worried about the Millenport game."

I feel the warmth of his worry in my chest, creeping up to blossom into a smile. "You don't have to worry. It's a home game. I'd be more worried if I were going to Millenport."

He tells me about a player his co-worker Alex is watching, at a college just outside Millenport. I tell him about our practice session with the backups. We make arrangements to meet in Hilltown to drive up to my parents' place on Monday—or Tuesday morning if we lose, and I have to practice Monday, which he assures me won't happen. We hang up with a kiss.

Wednesday I have to focus on our plays. Steez drills us over and over on the new ones. Even though I'm doing the same plays I was

three weeks ago, something about being a starter makes them feel more urgent, more important. This week, whether it's just the fact that it's become routine to glance over and see Gerrard and Carson in every practice, or the fact that I'm not worrying in the back of my head about someone finding out my secret, I'm a lot more comfortable. I like to think it shows in my play, but of course I wouldn't get that feedback from anyone but myself.

I make the mistake of picking up my cell phone before lunch and I spend the hour shoveling lean burgers into my mouth with one paw and flicking through messages with the other. I don't even get around to listening to the voice mail, because there's like fifty texts. Someone must have passed my number around to the reporters. I recognize Dwight's name, from the Sporting News, and Frank, the ESPN otter. Ten or eleven of the other names I recognize from TV, but the rest are all obscure. Half of them say "left u vm" or something like that. All of them are asking for follow-up comments: how has the team reacted to my outing, have I gotten pressure from the coach, have I gotten threats from other players or fans, have I gotten support from any players or fans, and so on and so on.

I start texting some responses to the names I recognize, half a burger still sitting in front of me. I dash off a couple off-the-cuff replies before hearing Lee in my head telling me to be careful what I say. Then I focus on it, and I focus on it so much that when Gerrard punches me on the shoulder, I'm surprised to look up and see the room mostly empty.

"Don't get fined," he says.

I nod, finish up the last message I was sending, grab the half burger, and cram it in my mouth on my way out the door. I'm the last one out on the field, but I'm on time. Steez narrows his eyes but doesn't say anything. But Colin, standing with two of his friends, mutters, "Prima donna," loud enough for me to hear it.

They all laugh. Fisher, nearby, snaps, "Hey. When you got reporters actually wantin' to talk to you, Colin, then let's hear what

you think. We're all on the field here. Let's go."

Colin's ears flatten. He mutters something else, but it's too low for anyone else to hear. Gerrard sees me looking his way and taps my shoulder. "Let's work," he says, flicking his large ears.

We do some basic footwork, sprints, and then go in for a film session by group. Gerrard, Carson, and I head in with the rest of the defense to watch the Millenport offense play. I find it hard to focus on watching what they're running because I'm still trying to compose text message responses in my head, wondering what the voicemails all say. Christ, snap out of it, I tell myself when I realize that I have no idea what the last play we just watched was. If I don't concentrate here, I'm going to let myself and Lee down.

Still, it's a relief to get home, where I spend three hours writing text messages and answering voicemails. People want to talk on the phone for hours, and I have to politely shuttle them off so I can talk to the next one. I ask the first two how they got my number, but they give me reporters' non-answers, so I stop asking. When they ask their questions, I take Fisher's advice. I say the same things over and over. "Of course it's been difficult," I say to them. "But I try to focus on football and keep my private life separate."

I pace back and forth in my apartment, eating chocolate protein bars, looking at the lights in the city below. I haven't spent a winter in Chevali before. It's nice, but I miss the chill and snow of home. I miss my parents, too, even though I didn't talk to them all that much. Knowing they were there if I wanted to call was something I didn't know I cared about until this week. Talking on the phone so much just makes me realize I'm not talking to the people I really want to. At least I can call Lee later.

Mentioning that I have a boyfriend might've been a mistake. The reporters ask about him all the time. *All* the time. "I don't want to bring him into this. He didn't choose to be public. No, I won't tell you where he lives. It was my decision to come out. No, I didn't consult him. No, I won't tell you his species. Yes, I get to see him during the season. No, not as often as I like."

Not nearly as often as I like. When I hang up from the last call and toss the protein bar wrapper in the trash, I strip to my boxers and lie face-down in my bed. I bunch the pillows under me like they're his chest and press my nose into them. His scent lingers there, buried so I have to really push my nose down to get a good whiff of it. It gets me good and hard, 'til I can almost feel him under me.

I'd never press him to come out. Even if he did, we couldn't live together, couldn't curl up together every night. But at least I can talk to him.

It doesn't even cross my mind that it's midnight where he is, not until later. He picks up on the first ring. "Hi, tiger."

Even though I'm tired of having the phone next to my ear, his smooth voice calms me, relaxes my muscles. I don't even realize how tightly my tail was curled up until it stretches out beside me, draping over the edge of the bed. "I've been on the phone for hours," I say. "Reporters. I don't know how they got my number."

"They all talk to each other," he says. "So what did you say to them?"

"Oh, it was fine. I didn't mention your name, or species. They asked a lot. But mostly they wanted to know about my teammates, and did I feel discriminated against. Some of them asked what I thought about the plight of gay football players and whether this would open the door for more of them to come out."

"And you said...?"

"I said I hope so."

He chuckles. "That makes two of us. What about the rest of it?"

"Just told the truth. Kept it bland and positive, like Fisher told me."

"He's got the experience. How many calls did you take?"

I stretch out to my full length, on my stomach. "A lot. But it was nice to talk about stuff, you know?"

"Yeah," he says, in that way that tells me he really does know. "I'll keep an eye on the Internet tomorrow. I hope they quote you

accurately."

"Why wouldn't they?" It's funny, but until he says that, I'd kind of forgotten that the things I was talking about with the reporters will end up in articles that people will read. My mind goes back to talking to Frank, and saying, "I can't really talk about stuff in the locker room." And I'm imagining my parents reading it, my mother saying, "what stuff?" and my father just putting it down with that look he gets.

"Just be careful," Lee says. "Don't get all caught up in being famous now."

"The guys are already giving me a hard time about that."

"I'm just saying."

"I can take care of myself."

I can hear his smile. "That's my line."

I growl. "Well, I can take care of myself too. How can I get in trouble telling the truth?"

"This from the person who kept his private life secret for two years?"

"Which I wouldn't have had to do if not for a certain conniving fox."

"You didn't put up a whole lot of resistance, as I recall."

I let out another growl. "Hey, I'm only a football player."

"Hence why you'd better be careful when talking to reporters."

That takes a second to sink in. "Christ, doc, it was funny once. I told you, I can handle it."

"I'll take a look tomorrow."

"You don't trust me?"

He snorts. "I don't trust them."

"I'm pretty sure—"

He cuts me off. "Look, you have a football game to prep for. I don't want you to be worrying about this other crap."

I exhale. "Yeah, you're right." He doesn't say anything. "You know, doc, it's not as much fun arguing with you when I can't drag you into the bedroom to make up."

“We can argue again on Monday.”

I feel a slow smile spreading over my face. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

His voice is a breathy purr. “You’d better hold me to something.”

By the time I hang up and turn off the light, even my boxers are feeling tight. It isn’t until the next morning that I realize with a flush of guilt that I never asked him whether he talked to his boss.

3

Work-Safe (Lee)

Morty's voicemail, left on Monday, just says, "Hey, wonder if you're watching this Miski press conference. Interesting stuff." Nothing about me being gay. Nothing about me being in trouble. It doesn't make me feel better. He's my closest friend on the Dragons, taught me a ton about evaluating kids (he's the one who's got me calling them 'kids,' some of these athletes not two years younger than I am). If he knew, he would've said, wouldn't he? He would've asked for a meeting.

Tuesday, I try to get time with him, but he's not in the office at all. So I sit at my desk, go over my evals, and wish I were back in Chevali. Don't get me wrong; I love my job. I get to watch football pretty much 60 hours a week, and the Hilltown Dragons pay for me to fly to college games around the Northeast region. It's the first year I've had a region all to myself. Last year, I was technically Morty's assistant, but I went out with all the different scouts on some of their trips. Then Ferd, a coyote with a glass eye who'd scouted the Northeast for eighteen years, left to become director of scouting for Port City. Nobody wanted his region, so Morty got permission from Campbell, the GM, to give it to me.

The Northeast isn't the best region. The weather sucks toward the end of the season, and it's common wisdom that the best players come from the Midwest and Southeast. But I like that challenge. It means I have to dig deeper to find the gems, I have to

be a better evaluator not only of talent, but of ability to perform in big games and to make the transition to the pro level.

All the other scouts played at least in college. Alex, the rabbit who covers the Southeast, is closest in age to me. He kicked for Lakewood State the year they played in a major bowl, and he's three years out of college. He and I share an office and a lot of sensibilities. A pair of black bears cover the West and Southwest, and they both played on the offensive line. The Midwest is the territory of Vic, the coyote I met at the combine two years ago, a former linebacker. And Paul, the white-tailed deer who covers the South, is the senior scout and a college star at running back, though a broken leg kept him out of the pros.

Wednesday is our big group meeting day. We keep a chart of all the players we're tracking, and talk about what they did the previous week. Morty's still tied up with the front office, so Paul starts the meeting. "Hey, rook, who ya got this week?" He rubs fingers over his antlers. He can't stop touching them when they're coming in.

I rattle some names off my laptop. There's a game in Chesterton, about forty miles from Port City, featuring three of my top ten prospects. That's the one I'm angling to get sent to.

As I talk, Paul nods, checking my list against his. While we're doing this, Morty walks in and drops into his chair. Paul defers to him when I'm done, but Morty, looking distracted, waves at him to go on.

Paul's antlers dip, turning back to me. He asks why I moved one player over another. I talk about the games they had, what I observed. This player stepped up, this player remained consistent, this player made an extraordinary play. This one was practically invisible in his game, this one whiffed on two important plays.

"Though I think he's hurt and not letting on," I say, finishing up.

"I saw the end of that game," Paul says. "That faggot better be hurt or he's not goin' anywhere."

Morty rumbles. “Hey, you can’t say that now, y’know.”

“What?”

“Faggot.”

Paul stares at him and then laughs. “Oh, that tiger, the Firebirds guy?” He waves a hand. “You see him anywhere around?”

I can feel Morty looking at me. I don’t meet his eyes. I’m just about sure that’s going to be all that’s said when Alex pipes up. “There was a gay guy on my team.” Everyone looks at him. He shrugs, scratches behind one of his long ears. “No big deal.”

“What, the punter?” I’m sure Paul would’ve said “kicker” if that hadn’t been Alex’s position.

Alex looks mildly back at him. “No, the center. He’s working at a sports equipment store now. Nice guy.”

Paul snorts, and gives his antlers another rub. “Well, I never played with one.”

“Shame,” I say. “They mighta taught you that jerking off works better on your dick than on your antlers.”

He snaps his arm down and glares at me, while Alex snickers and the bears chuckle. Paul points at Alex. “Gimme your list.”

After the meeting, Morty takes me aside. “Take it easy on Paul,” he says. “He’s old school, like me.”

“You changed,” I point out. “When I first met you, you were tossing around ‘queer’ and ‘faggot’ like they were cuss words.”

He grins. Even though he’s a cougar and about thirty years older, his feline grin, with its touch of earnestness, reminds me of Dev. “They were, then.” The grin fades, and he gives me a searching look. “Hey. Come into the office a sec.”

My fur prickles. *He knows.* I take a breath, smoothing it down, but my treacherous heart speeds up. I take my time walking in, trying to get a lid on my reactions. This is it. I’m gonna come out. Just like Dev did.

Morty closes the door behind me with a slam and waves me to the guest chair while he parks his butt on the corner of his desk. I

sit and look up at him. “When I met you,” he says slowly. “You were pretty good friends with Miski.”

My heart’s pounding. I’m sure he can see the tremors in my ears. I take a breath, will myself to be calm. “Yes. I knew he was gay.”

“Uh-huh.” He smiles, but his tail is lashing. “Anything you want to tell me?”

He’s tense. I take a breath. “Yeah,” I say. “I—”

“Keeping in mind,” he interrupts, “that if there was a relationship between a player and a guy working for a team, and that player got drafted by that team, and that guy had something to do with it, that that’d be something pretty serious.” He looks steadily at me. “Could get the guy fired. Maybe the guy who hired him, too. Don’t know if you know that.”

I’m having trouble getting air into my throat. I just nod.

“So,” he says, leaning back. “Is there anything you want to tell me?”

Slowly, I shake my head. I force my throat to open long enough to say, “No.”

He relaxes. “You still talk to Miski?” I nod, once. “What made him come out?”

I tell him the story of Brian’s blog and the media attention, of the increasing pressure and Dev’s hatred of lies and hiding. I tell him how the team reacted, about Fisher’s crucial support, about Coach’s acknowledgment. He listens without interrupting. “Well, it’s a hell of a thing,” he says.

“Hope there’ll be more soon.” I still feel all hopped up. Can’t stop my tail from swinging back and forth.

“Dunno.” He shakes his head. “Easier now, but still hard. Any other gay players are gonna wait and see what happens to him. Even then, everybody’s got their own lives, right? Got to make their own choices.”

The thing about staying closeted, though, the thing I knew but didn’t feel until I experienced it here at the Dragons, is that once

you fall into that pattern, it's hard to break out. If you're doing well at your job, things are smooth, and you've earned respect from your team, so what if you can't be out? What business is your personal life of theirs, anyway? I sure as hell don't need to know that Vic's wife is cheating on him, but Paul heard about it from one of his friends. Now we all know it—all except Vic. "Until a few more guys come out, I'm gonna keep giving Paul a hard time."

Morty starts to say something, and then laughs, a laugh that turns into a cough. "I know better'n to try to talk you out of it. Fuck, I need to take a walk."

"Rough meeting this morning?"

He fishes a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "I'll see you this afternoon."

I glance at the pack as we walk out. "That crap's no good for you."

He holds the cigarette in his paw, and turns toward the front door. "Gets me through the day," he says, and raises his paw in salute as he leaves.

Around quarter to twelve, Alex asks if I want to go to lunch. "Tomorrow," I say. "I'm meeting some friends." It's easier to lie than to say, "I want some time alone to think."

He scratches behind his ear. "Didn't know you had friends."

"Sure, just most of them are imaginary." I look at the empty air to my right. "Isn't that right, Harvey?"

Alex snorts and rubs his long ears. "Tomorrow's double patty day at Jeffrey's."

"I'm there. Hey, if you're leaving now, I'll walk out with you."

Outside, the wind's picked up, biting at my nose. Alex folds his long ears down. "What do you think of Miski?"

"I think it's great," I say. "About fucking time."

"I mean, you think he's gonna last?"

I think about that one, my eyes narrowed to slits against the wind. "He's gotta be pretty tough to come out the way he did. I think he'll last."

"Bet he gets injured before the end of the season."

I turn to look at him. He's peering ahead into the wind, same as I am, bouncing the way rabbits do. "Everyone gets injured."

"Yeah, but I bet someone knocks him out of a game."

Instinct overrides thought. "You're on. Bet you a lunch?"

We shake on it. He goes into Wrap Party, a fast-food place that does good veggie wraps, while I head down to Barlow's, a slightly more upscale place where you have to sit down to get lunch.

"Just one," I tell the squirrel at the hostess's desk. She guides me to a small two-person table by the windows, removes one of the place settings, and leaves me alone with my thoughts and a menu. I order a glass of white wine and a Cajun chicken sandwich, which is sure to be as Cajun as I am straight.

The columns that appeared that morning from Dev's interviews were what I would expect from sports media: neutral to favorable, interested in his story, talking about how hard it is for gay athletes these days. The comments were about what I would have expected from the sports fan base: by and large, gay people and Chevali fans are supportive. A few assholes are assholes. And there was a comment that read, "I know his dad, sucks to be him."

Which makes me think again about visiting Dev's parents. It just seems like a disaster waiting to happen. I'm the intruder, the symbol of everything they think is "wrong" with their son. I don't know what I'm most worried about: his parents freezing me out, or Dev getting upset when we don't magically get along, or me losing it when they make some bullshit conservative remark. I'll keep a lid on my temper, but it won't be easy if we're there longer than a day or two.

It'll hurt Dev if we don't leave on better terms than when we arrive. Hell, it hurts him just knowing I'm on the outs with my parents, no matter how much I tell him I don't mind it. I respect *his* attachment to his parents, whether or not I understand it. That's why I'm still going to go along with him to his parents' place, despite all my misgivings. I'll be on my best behavior, and I'll

figure out a way to make it work.

My fur itches with the idea that I should reach out to my parents to try to get some insight into what to say or what not to say to Dev's parents. This is important to Dev, and therefore to me. But I can't bring myself to get out the phone. Father would be drily snide. Mother…I can't even imagine what she'd say to me.

Halfway through the glass of wine, my thoughts are going around in circles. At least a lunch with Alex would have been a distraction. I fish around in my bag for my notebook, to go through my list of players again, and as I pull it out, a business card flutters to the ground.

Hal Kinnel's card. I turn it over in my paws. I shouldn't call him, if only because calling him would give him my phone number. That aside, I also don't feel like making up a whole fake history of me dating Dev. But thinking about him reminds me of Dev's press conference, which reminds me of Dev's courage and my losing the opportunity to come out at my office. I think of Kinnel waiting for Lee White to call him, hoping desperately for his exclusive. I wonder if he's talked to Corcoran about Dev.

If I'm going to talk to someone, though, it should be Salim. I tried to call him last night and got voice mail. Lunchtime, I know he'll be at his desk.

So I signal to the waiter that I'll be right back. I take my phone to one of the phone alcoves in the hallway to the restrooms. I can still see my table and the rest of the dining room from here. Across the hall from me, framed pictures of the championship Dragons teams from earlier years stare back at me.

Two rings, and then I hear Salim's slightly accented voice. I say hi, and he lowers his voice. "Lee," he says. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say. "Tried to call you last night."

"It was my night with Jeremy," he says.

"Can you talk now? Go to a meeting room, or something?"

"I wish I could. I have a meeting in nine minutes."

"Tonight?"

"Dinner with Fasha's parents."

"I don't know how you juggle a family, a boyfriend, *and* in-laws."

"By neglecting other good friends. I'm sorry. Maybe this weekend."

I shift my phone. "I'll be traveling, watching games. Next week?"

He clucks. "Perhaps. You are okay, though?"

"I'm fine. Work is interesting."

"Related to your tiger? I look forward to hearing about it."

"I'll save the story," I promise.

When he's gone to his meeting, I hold the phone in one paw, Kinnel's card in the other. I still have five or ten minutes until my food's ready. What can it hurt?

He picks up on the second ring. "Hello?"

I put on my Lauren Bacollie voice, with a little less sex than I use for Dev, and identify myself. "I just wanted to get back to you."

"That's mighty kind of you." I can almost see his ears perk up. "Did you see that interview Miski did with TSN?"

Of course I did. "I think so."

"In the interview on TSN, he says that for a year and a half in the league, he hasn't been able to talk about his relationship."

Across from me, a tough tiger in a 1960s Dragons uniform glares out of the picture. I wonder if maybe he was gay. "Of course not."

His voice is soft. "I'm guessin' he didn't mean you."

I realize that he wants to be the one who broke the news to me, so he can get my reaction and be the one to comfort me, too. I put a lot of feeling into my "Oh."

"So you didn't know he had a boyfriend for a year and a half?"

"Clearly not."

Here comes the comfort. "Hey, look. Maybe it wasn't his secret to tell. Maybe his boyfriend wasn't ready to come out."

I struggle for words. "That's gonna be tough, right? I mean, if

his boyfriend wants to stay—hidden."

"Damn, you're sweet. So worried about him." He exhales across the phone. "Like you know, a couple can't live too long together if they got secrets."

I need to get off the subject of me and Dev. "Was it your secret or Cimarine's?"

That gets a surprised cough out of him. "You remember her name. Well, I reckon it was kind of both, and kind of neither."

"That's not a real answer."

"Miss White," he says, "I think we should be tradin' secrets over dinner, or at least coffee."

I lean back against the wall, and grin. "Next time I'm in Chevali."

"Deal. Hey, Otterman did a thing on Miski, you see it?"

My ears perk. "No."

"Top Ten Signs Your Neighborhood Is Becoming Fashionable Again. Number Six: Devlin Miski just moved in next door."

Despite myself, I laugh. "What was number one?"

"Something about the President, I don't remember. Did he see it?"

"No."

"You talked to him?"

My tail swishes, annoyed that he caught me admitting I talked to Dev. "The President?" He laughs. "I called Dev the other night. Straightened some stuff out."

"He say he was sorry?"

"Kind of." I remember his paws on me, and close my eyes, imagining being a dumped vixen rather than a loved boyfriend. "It was hard."

"Hey. It's good you can talk."

"I told him about meeting you. He wanted to know if you saw Corcoran's remarks to ESPN."

"Yeah. Standard stuff."

I smile. "Standard and sincere, or...?"

“I haven’t talked to him.” He sounds a bit annoyed.

“But you know him. Did it sound like him?”

“We don’t go out for beers every night.” His voice softens. “But yeah. Sounded like him.”

“Who do you go out for beers with?” Part of me wants to know if he talks to anyone else who might be influential. Part of me wants to know how lonely and desperate he really is.

“Miss White,” he says, and then stops himself short. “I don’t drink much these days.”

“She got the friends in the divorce?”

“Who got your friends?” he parries.

I look across the hall at the team photo, all the guys standing together, shoulder to shoulder. Tigers and foxes, bears and wolves, cheetahs and coyotes. “We didn’t really have much but each other,” I say.

“*You* didn’t,” he points out, and then, immediately, “Sorry.”

“Do you try to meet people? Maybe not in bars, but…parties? Mixers?”

“Uh-huh.” His tone’s sarcastic. “’Cause I really wanna meet someone desperate and lonely.”

“So what are you doing talking to me?”

I say it lightly, but he takes a moment to respond. “Seems like we could help each other out,” he says, slowly.

Deliberately, I keep my tone jokey. “I’m not interested in helping you get back at your ex.”

“Figured that, since you don’t wanna get back at yours. That’s good. Healthy. No hard feelings.”

My paw rests near my sheath. “None right now, anyway. It’s all history.”

“History repeats. Hey, y’know, I grew up a Dragons fan.”

The non-sequitur disrupts my train of thought. “In Chevali?”

“I grew up in Boliat, but my dad was a Dragons fan. He taught me ’bout all those great teams. Kill and Maim, and the Flying Foxes, and Coach Vine.” His voice softens, with a note of longing.

“Made me want to write about sports.”

I crane my neck, looking down the hall. Further down, the two bears Killiner and Mamelon bookend the 1968 World Champion team. Behind them, Henderson, one of the two Flying Foxes, wears his trademark smirk. The other fox, Banks, joined in 1970. In 1971 they combined for twenty-one touchdowns, a record that stood for thirty years. They’re leaning against each other, grinning, in the 1972 World Champions photo.

In 1973, Henderson left for Yerba. Neither he nor Banks was ever the same apart. “Great teams. And hey, you’re a real sportswriter. So I know you did that right.”

He’s quiet. My stomach rumbles. Finally, he says, “Yeah. I guess.” Before I can ask what that means, he says, “Dragons’ll be good again.”

“Maybe in our lifetimes.”

“Teams go through rough patches. They pull through.” He pauses for what sounds like a drink. “What about you? Did you grow up in Hilltown?”

My hackles rise. I crane my neck, looking the other way down the hall as if I might spot him there, smirking. Then I remember I called him from my cell phone, and he must have seen the area code. “I’m sorry,” I say. “My lunch is ready.”

“Listen,” he says quickly, “If you could get a quote Miski ain’t already used with another paper…”

“I’ll do my best,” I say.

“And Miss White?” I pause, waiting. “It gets easier,” he says, softly. “That’s what they tell me.”

I take a second to feel the emotion in his voice. “Thank you, Mister Kinnel. I’ll talk to you later.”

I make my way past a number of people, keeping my tail clear of brushing their chairs. Their conversations float past my ears, but all I hear is the replay of my conversation with Kinnel. Jesus, the poor fox is still not over his wife. And he thinks I’m doing better at getting over being dumped. Should I give him some tips? Is that

even fair?

I can't think about that right now. So I wonder: What did he do to alienate his wife? It could be about anything. Who knows what drives people apart? Maybe it was something as ordinary as one of them cheating on the other. Maybe it was his drinking. Maybe they have a gay kid and he's okay with that, and she's not.

Whatever happened between them, Kinnel clearly didn't expect it. Teams, now, teams get broken up all the time. Players get traded or cut; they get injured, or they leave for Yerba. Dev might be in a better spot with his team than his parents now, but what if he gets traded? What if Corey Mitchell comes back and takes over the starting spot? Kinnel doesn't think that'll happen. Doesn't think Corcoran will dump Dev. I wonder whether Dev will ever be in a photo in a hallway. I wonder if Kinnel will talk to Corcoran and find out for sure.

The chicken sandwich is safe and bland. I get back to the office and sit down for an afternoon of watching film, in between which I check Dev's e-mail box. Lots of supportive mail, a discouraging amount of hate mail. A letter from a closeted otter who's a college swimmer. I kind of snort at that—everyone assumes swimmers are at least bi—but he's pretty stressed about it. Dev's coming out has inspired him to do the same to his teammates. He promises to let me—Dev—know how it goes.

It makes me wonder if someone interested in digging further into Dev's story and the biases and hurdles he faces could really do good for some of the other kids out there, kids afraid of coming out because of the people they live with, or play with. I wonder if Kinnel is up to that.

Probably not. He's a nice guy, but he wants stories that will earn money. Dev's a headline right now. Once that cools off, he won't be as interested in me. Unless I tease him a bit more.

The thought makes me smile. I'd need to stay close to him if I want to find out what Corcoran's thinking, right? Despite Kinnel's denial, he's got some line in to the owner. I wonder briefly if that

was the secret he and Cimarine fought about. Maybe he was Corcoran's gay lover. Or maybe she was cheating on him with Corcoran.

Plenty of time to ponder all those juicy scenarios. Right now I've got Dev's game to worry about, and then the visit to his parents. I get my phone out on the walk back to the office and pull up my folks' number. I stare at it for a little while and then put the phone away again. They won't be able to give me any useful advice, nothing worth the stress I'd get from talking to them. I can handle Dev's parents.

4

Crashing Boar (Dev)

Thursday morning, and my paw is stuck to my sheath. I vaguely remember deciding to rest just a few more minutes before washing up. I stumble to the shower and get ready for another day of football. A billboard on the way in reminds me that Ogleby said the commercial people were coming today, so I call him. He insists that they're going to be there at noon, and I tell him that they need to reschedule. "It's too late," he squeaks, but I hang up on him. I don't want to think what would happen if a filming crew showed up in the middle of practice. I'd be lucky to get only a fine and not a suspension.

I push that worry aside during morning practice. I've gotten pretty good at blocking out other thoughts, apart from thinking about Lee watching me, telling me what I should be doing better. We work on footwork for an hour and then go back into plays. I've got my role down, and Gerrard and Carson have theirs. Steez is happy, though he somehow wants more from us. I'm not sure what more I can do; I'm running my route perfectly.

"You didn't stick around to practice with us last night," Gerrard says as we head into the locker room for lunch.

"Yeah, sorry, I had a bunch of calls."

"We're practicing again tonight."

I don't want to annoy Gerrard, and I know how much he just wants me to care about football. "Okay. I'll stick around."

“Good.” He claps me on the shoulder, and we sit down together for lunch. I barely even notice the hostile stares of Colin and Zillo, a muscular coyote who backs up my position. Pike and Kodi sit near us, but they’re watching Fisher, who’s sitting across from us.

We talk shop, discussing Millenport’s star boar, the offensive linemen. Gerrard starts out matter-of-fact, dissecting his moves from the film we watched. Fisher tosses in some jokes, and I follow suit. Then Fisher says, “You guys heard what he said about Dev, right?”

I haven’t, but Gerrard just shrugs. “We need more motivation to play well?”

Colin’s ears are perked. Pike looks interested. “What’d he say?”

“You mind?” Fisher looks at me.

“Why should I?” But I find I don’t really want to hear it. “I mean, I assume it’s just a bunch of incoherent grunting.”

We’re still laughing when Coach comes in, glaring at me. Our laughter dies. The intense glare of those yellow eyes drops like ice into the pit of my stomach. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “Outside,” he growls.

I get up silently, knowing already what the problem is. Sure enough, waiting in the lobby of the team facility are a pair of deer with film cameras and a gum-chewing lemur. “There he is!” the lemur cries at me, arms outstretched.

“Ten thousand,” Coach tells me. “Make it go away.” He stalks back into the facility, leaving me with an afterimage of yellow eyes burned into my sight.

“We don’t want to interrupt your practice,” the lemur says. “Just want to film it, thirty seconds footage of you working out, some closeups.”

“Then you take off the uniform to show this.” One of the deer holds out a white shirt with some kind of hideous green logo on it.

“You can’t film our practice.” I sigh and take the shirt. It’s made of some slick material and doesn’t feel half-bad, really. “Look, I can run around out here for like a minute. That okay?”

They all stare at me like I said I was going to practice naked. “Uh, we need *thirty seconds* of footage,” the lemur says.

“Okay,” I say, slowly, “so I don’t have to run around for the full minute.”

The lemur exchanges eyerolls with the deer. “Thirty seconds of footage will take us about an hour to get.”

“What?”

“We need to get a bunch of different angles, lighting, different takes, I mean, we’re not making ‘The Godfather’ here, but we need some good stock to work with.”

“Also,” one of the deer says, “if you could, like, check out some of your teammates…”

My claws are out. I resist the urge to shred the shirt before tossing it back to the deer. “I gotta go practice.” I turn and follow after Coach.

“Wait, wait!” The lemur runs after me. “Okay, we won’t film practice. Can we just get you doing some drills this afternoon?”

“I don’t think—”

“It’s just an hour of your time. And your agent already signed the contract.”

Fuck Ogleby all to hell. My tail lashes. “Fine. I get off practice at five. I’ll be out here then.”

“Awesome.” The lemur tries to shake my paw and grabs my wrist instead as I don’t quite manage to avoid him. “You’re gonna love this, Devlin. We’re gonna be great for each other.”

The only things that are great for me are Lee and football, and I can’t call Lee right now. I shake off the lemur and stomp in to practice some football.

“So nice you can join us, Miski,” Steez barks. I mumble an apology under my breath and line up with Gerrard to my right as Zillo trots back to the bench with a sneer on his muzzle. I’m only five minutes late, so I’m sure that putting him out there was another message from Steez. Or from Coach. I growl at myself and clear it out of my head, focusing on where to plant my feet and

what's going on on the other side of the ball.

It's not a great practice. I try to focus, but the guys seem pretty cold. Even Gerrard, who's usually businesslike and efficient, talks to me less than usual. I would be more bothered by it if I could think about anything but the commercial.

I'd started out the practice composing an angry rant to Ogleby in my head. I moderate it as the practice goes on, as I perform well enough to stop Steez's grumbling. After all, it's an opportunity. It is what I make of it.

The reality of it hadn't registered with me until the cameras showed up in front of me. I'd seen the huge cameras that the networks use to film games, but I'd never had one just for me. I start thinking about my brother and his commercial, too. This would be one I got paid to do, not the other way around. I think about Lee watching it, about the fact that this happened because I came out, that Lee will be proud of me for being an icon. My parents will see it, and maybe seeing me on TV will...I don't know, do something.

It takes an hour and a half to get their thirty seconds of footage, and it's not quite what I envisioned. They have me run around on the parking lot, and pose, and pose, and pose. And the one camera circles me, getting some shots that, frankly, I don't think are appropriate for a commercial airing during the day. I don't say anything, because maybe he was just getting into position for the main shots.

I don't have a chance to ask them after. By the time they wrap (that's what they call it), my toe is aching and I'm worried I might've fucked it up, so I just wave off their assurances and head back into the complex.

I shower, grab an ice pack from the training room, and am just wrapping it against my foot when Gerrard and Carson come in from the field. "Thought you were going to join us," Gerrard says, while Carson strips off his uniform.

"Oh. Shit." I stop wrapping my foot for a minute to pay

attention to him. “I’m sorry, they got me worked up...Ogleby signed a contract...”

He stares, expressionless. “You signed a contract with the team, too.”

“I know, I...” I flatten my ears. “It won’t happen again.”

His gaze flicks down to the ice pack. “Hurt yourself?”

Carson, naked and holding a towel, pauses on his way to the shower to look. I point out to the lot. “They had me running on asphalt.”

His eyes narrow. In that moment, I realize I could’ve said I’d hurt myself during practice. I could’ve made up some other excuse that would have neatly explained why I’d skipped extra practices with him, instead of sitting here now, waiting for Gerrard to tell me what a risk I took to my career to star in a commercial. But he just shakes his head once and goes back to his locker, pulling his jersey off.

“It’s not bad,” I say. “I’ll be fine for practice tomorrow.”

He doesn’t look at me. “See you then.”

I feel like crap all the way home, but at least that doesn’t make me speed. I decide to call Ogleby and take it out on him.

“Hey,” I say when he picks up, “what the shit is it with this film crew showing up during practice? I told you—”

“Did you do the commercial? Tell me you did the commercial.”

“I did it, it’s over, but I screwed up my foot.”

He’s gratifyingly alert. “What do you mean, screwed up? Did those guys screw up your foot? I knew I should’ve put damages in that contract. I’ll get on the phone to them right now.”

“You’re the one—” I say, but Ogleby has his own idea in his head.

“I’m writing the note down right now, I’ll call them the minute we get off here. How’s the reporters? I like the stuff that’s coming out, people are calling with questions, once the Today Show hits you’re gonna be huge.”

“They’re fine.” I turn the corner onto my street. “I don’t know

how they all got my number, though."

"I gave it to them. You let me know if anything's bothering you and I'll fix it, okay? We're a team, we're working together."

"Wait, *you*—?"

"That's it, kid, now I'm gonna go take care of that shirt company, they should take better care of their talent. We're gonna get a commercial on during the Today Show."

"That soon?"

"They'll have it up this week during your game. They already bought the spot. That's why they had to shoot today."

"Lion Christ."

"I gotta go, Dev, you take care and tell me if anything's bothering you, anything at all."

"I don't want you giving my number out!" I yell, but I get only silence back. I feel myself close to throwing the phone out the window, so I put it down and concentrate on navigating my parking garage. At least Ogleby isn't giving out my home address, I reflect in the elevator on the way up.

I turn on my GameBox and throw in UFL Football 2009 while I call Lee. I tell him all about the commercial and them showing up in the middle of the day.

"You can't let them distract you from football."

"I'm not." Even though they took me away from extra practice, even though my foot is still sore.

"The commercial is cool, don't get me wrong. But if you don't keep up your football—"

"Christ, doc, it was one day." I shift on the couch, leaning back against the armrest.

He whuffs into the phone. "How'd Fisher react?"

"He said 'good for you.'"

"That all?"

I shift on the couch. "The guys are fine. They're just focused."

"Uh-huh." He sounds amused. "Got any more commercials on the horizon?"

“I don’t know, I’ll ask Ogleby.” I settle back into the couch and growl. “He gave my number to all those reporters.”

“Of course he did,” Lee says. “He wants you to be famous. The more famous you are, the more endorsements you get and the more money he gets. At this point, I doubt he even cares about your football career. When’s the commercial going to air?”

“He cares.” But I realize that Ogleby’s swift anger could just as easily have been purely for my benefit. “It’ll air during the Today Show and during the game Sunday.”

“I’ll have to record it.”

I grin. “Where you flying in from?”

“Freestone. I’ll be at the Gresham – Holtower game until eight or so. Eleven o’clock flight down to Chevali, at the stadium bright an early Sunday morning.”

“Where you sittin’?”

“Our section. Row…let me check.” I hear the click of keys. “Forty-one.”

“I’ll be looking.”

“I’ll be watching.”

I smile and rest my head back against the couch.

GAME DAY STARTS CLOUDY, but the clouds burn off by the time I get to the stadium. My toe feels better, about a hundred percent now, and the Friday and Saturday practices have made Gerrard and Steez more confident in my execution of our new plays. I spend lunch breaks and evenings talking to reporters, but I haven’t gotten fined again, and I’m able to focus on football better. The rest of the team still acts chilly, but by Sunday, that’s overtaken with the rush of game day. This week, the extra incentive of the bye week hovers over us, the mini-vacation that will be much sweeter if we play well and win.

I love Sunday mornings. Whatever else happens during the

week, Coach tells us to forget it. For a few hours, we need to be a team working together toward a common goal. This week, when we have our pre-game meeting, he gives us the same rah-rah speech he gives us every week.

This week, he adds something new. “We are a team,” he says. “Anyone comes after one of us, they come after all of us. We play together!” He waits for our answering ‘Yeah!’ “We fight together!”

“Yeah!”

“We win together! Firebirds!”

We all jump to our feet and cheer, “Firebirds!”

“All right,” he says. “Keep your heads in the game. Turn off all your phones now and don’t turn ’em on again ’til we’re done.” He doesn’t look at me when he says it, but Gerrard does, and I don’t have any doubt about where this new thing came from. Especially when Charm comes over just as I’m turning off my phone. He swipes at it, grinning as I pull it out of reach.

“Yeah, pretty-boy, save your fan club for after.”

I haven’t seen the big stallion much this week. When we’re not on the road, we’re not rooming together, and we practice separately. But he saw me get fined, and I guess he heard about the commercial. I fire back at him, “Such a pity you’re gonna have to wait to set up your date tonight ’til after the game.”

He laughs. “You kiddin’? I’ll just walk outside and grab my pick.”

“Sorry,” I say, “did you say ‘pick’ or ‘prick’?”

He guffaws. “Hey, did I tell you how I lost my wallet that one time?”

“Yes,” I say, and Gerrard, next to me, echoes that with a little more annoyance. The wallet story is Charm’s favorite sexual escapade story, only he keeps changing it. If it was ever based in reality, I’m sure it isn’t any more.

Charm jerks his thumb toward Gerrard. “Sometime when Coach isn’t around. I got a new version.”

He walks off to finish dressing. I put the phone in the locker,

with a little bit of regret that I can't text Lee during the game. It doesn't quite go away when I realize that Ogleby and the reporters can't call me either. It's just me and the guys. I like that.

Though I would like to text Lee right before we run out. I'm sitting next to Fisher after Aston does his round of the locker room, punching all the starters. "How you think they'll react?"

He punches the arm Aston didn't. "You're a Firebird. They'd love you if you murdered someone."

I snort. "Murder? Really? You had to go there?"

"Don't worry. Come on, let's go get ready to rumble."

We join the rest of the defense, jumping around, getting fired up. I feel that energy surging through me, see it in the eyes of the tigers and foxes and coyotes around me, the heavy bears jumping as if they're as light as we are, all of us feeling exactly the same thing in that moment. We are parts of a whole, bubbling with energy just waiting to be unleashed on the Millenport Orcas. In this pre-game moment, we are all potential, all hope and optimism and confidence. My ferocious grin is mirrored on fifty muzzles around me.

And then we break, and run through the tunnel. I can hear the screaming of the fans, I can see signs bobbing in the crowd across the field, and I think I see my name on at least one of them. My steps falter just as I get to the light. Fisher knocks into me from behind. "Get out there," he growls.

I jog out to thunders of applause. I hear a guy yell "Yeah Miski!" I hear a shout of "You go, girl," which I assume is directed at me, because I've never heard it on a football field before. Then I get out onto the field, and I look around.

There are signs with rainbows, signs with my name on them. I spot one that says "GO HOME-O, MISKI," and others like that, but there are signs supporting me, too: "WE LOVE YOU #57" and what I think are three girls with a sign that says "DEV'S DIVAS." I get a grateful swell of relief and raise a fist to the crowd nearest me. They respond with a huge cheer.

The sidelines are weird, too. There's a whole lot of people there who aren't players: equipment managers, waterboys, press. Usually you just ignore them and hang out with your group, but I see a few of them staring at me, looking away when I look at them. An armadillo, though, a guy who's been setting out the drinks probably ever since the Firebirds moved to Chevali, he gives me a grin and a thumbs-up. Three cheerleaders, pretty weasels, come over and hug me on their way out. When I see Charm's expression as they run right past him, that settles me down a little. Just a little. It's game time. Nothing's gonna settle me down 'til I run out onto the field.

I'm reminded of the Aventira game when we line up opposite Millenport for the first time, even though their uniforms are turquoise blue and white rather than navy blue and silver. There's no lippy stallion to taunt me, this time. A black bear and their star boar line up on my side, with another boar on the outside. They don't say a word, but the gleam of their eyes in the shadow of their helmets stays fixed on me. I have no doubt what's on their mind.

The first series, they run the ball to my side, and the bear sidesteps Fisher to slam into my side, knocking me to the turf. "Keep your fucking mouth shut, pussy," he growls as he gets up.

"Nice to meet you, too." I stand up and shake it off. He left his assignment to come tackle me, meaning Fisher was able to drop the runner for a loss. The bear still high-fives his friends as they get back into their set. "Asshole," I mumble next to Gerrard.

"Don't worry about him," Gerrard says. "If they spend the whole game focusing on you, they're not gonna get anywhere. You can take it."

"Course I can." I stand up and glare back at them. "They're gonna try running it again."

"That's my read too." He nods. "Cover the runner."

This time, I know the bear's coming for me, so I keep an eye on him. But it's the boar who dives through the line, trying to take me out. He's not fast enough. I shoot past him, heading for the hole he

left in the line. Gerrard's there a half-step ahead of me. We drop the runner for another loss.

The next down, they have to throw. We drop back into coverage and break up the pass.

That sequence of events repeats itself over and over in the first half. Fisher never lets the bear get a head of steam up again, but on several plays the bear gets through when Fisher sees a chance to stop a run. We meet up three more times, though he doesn't say anything again and neither of us goes down.

At halftime, we're up 14-0, and Coach gives us a great pep talk. Gerrard grabs me and Carson and we go over some of the things we need to fix up with Steez. "If I'm rushing for a gap," Gerrard says, "don't follow me. Cover the slot guys in case they try to dump the ball off." I just nod, even though on that play I didn't even know he was going for the gap until I'd already started. None of us talks about me being targeted, except when Steez says, "They keep coming for you, they leave holes elsewhere. Heads not in game. We *use* this."

And we do. Their coach must've talked to them at halftime, too, because they stop coming after me so directly. I see why the boar's doing so well; on certain plays, he takes Fisher one-on-one and blocks him perfectly, frustrating Fisher so much that his tail's lashing when he lines up. They only break off two good runs the whole third quarter, and by the fourth, when we're up 21-0, they start throwing the ball a lot more. I bump their receiver, disrupt their patterns, and swat the ball down once. In fact, the fourth quarter is dull, dull, dull, right up until it gets horribly interesting.

It's a blown play, supposed to be a run to the strong side, but our guys collapse the line on that side and the running back scrambles toward us, cocking his arm like he's going to throw. I see this and drop back, looking for the slot guys behind me while Fisher and Brick take care of the bear and boars. I don't see, until we watch it again on film, that Gerrard drops back too, that we're both covering one guy, while Brick takes on their star boar all by

himself.

That's why Fisher has the bear and the other boar to himself. I swear they planned it. The bear blocks him backwards into the boar. The boar, going low, swings his head and catches Fisher right behind the knee with his tusks, swinging through viciously.

I only see this later, on the replay. The first thing I notice is Fisher falling, clutching his leg. Whistles blow all around and play stops. The boar tries to deny it, but he's got blood on his tusk, for Christ's sake. I'm over there before I know what I'm doing, screaming in his face, "What the hell was that?"

"Hey, faggot," he snarls, "it's a game for guys with balls."

"You were getting up and you fucking gored him!"

He pushes me in the chest. I take a swing at him. "You wanna fight, homo?"

The line judge is trying to separate us, but even though he's a big rhino, I don't have any trouble getting around him. "Try me, sissy-boy," I snarl. "Not so easy fighting someone face to face, is it?"

Brick is up next to me now, distracting the line judge, both of us pushing the boar back. His teammates flank him, and the ref comes over. "It was a cheap shot," Brick says. "Just 'cause you couldn't get past him all game."

"I can get past him whenever I want," the boar growls.

"Break it up here." The ref is a stocky deer. He rattles his antlers against our helmets, pushing us apart.

"Maybe you'll decide you want to sometime tomorrow," I taunt him.

The boar yells back at me, "Let's see how you do without your butt-buddy to protect you."

"Did you see that cheap shot?" I yell at the ref, trying to ignore what he's saying about me.

Brick isn't so subtle. "You want a butt-buddy, go fuck your faggot friend there," he yells, lunging. The rhino turns to stop him cold, but that leaves me a clear path, and, unfortunately, the boar gives me an excuse to use it.

"Didn't make your boyfriend any slower," he yells. "Throw anyone you want at me."

"Take me," I snap, and leap forward, raking claws across his snout.

He staggers back, clapping hands to his bleeding nose. Whistles shriek again, flags fly. Brick and Gerrard pull me away while the refs are making hand motions that I don't understand until Gerrard pushes me toward the sideline. I want to beat the hell out of that boar. The blood on his snout isn't near enough payment for Fisher's leg.

Reality filters in when Zillo jogs out to replace me. Zillo has that same sneer on his muzzle that I always see when he looks at me, but when his eyes flick to where the trainers are surrounding Fisher, the sneer falters. He gives me another glance and then lowers his head and jogs to the line. He's a big coyote, but still not as big as Gerrard, and definitely not as tall as me.

"Calm it down, calm it down," Coach yells. The trainers lift Fisher, supporting his weight as he hops on one leg. I run over to his side, ignoring the ref yelling at me to get off the field. I still haven't quite processed that I've been thrown out of the game.

"Don't blow it," he growls at me through gritted teeth. "Don't let 'em get to you."

"Too late. How's the leg?" I ask, anger surging again at the goddamn boar.

Fisher just gives me a strained look that tells me everything I need to know. Fisher's backup, Pike, is already out too, walking off the fifteen yards with the rest of the defense. I walk back to the sidelines with Fisher; the refs stop yelling at me to get off the field when they see what I'm doing.

I walk back to the locker room with the trainers, and split time between watching Fisher get treatment and watching the game on the locker room TVs. Fisher gives me a thumbs-up, and then the sedative kicks in, and he gets kinda glassy-eyed. So I focus on the game.

Zillo does okay in my spot, though several times I yell at him through the TV to get up to the play faster. Pike isn't as quick as Fisher, but when they run around him, Gerrard is there waiting. We hold 'em scoreless, even with the penalty. Final score: 21-0.

The locker room is hopping, afterwards. We're talking about Jaws' two TDs, the second a brilliant 57-yard run through three tackles. The defense didn't score, but we got our shutout, and even against a team starting a lousy quarterback with no receiving corps to speak of, that's an accomplishment. Coach gives out game balls, to Jaws on offense, and to Fisher on defense—some of it is sympathy, but he did have two tackles for loss and five tackles overall before he was injured.

"Even our oldest vet can still bring it," Coach says. "This team is gonna go far because on any given day, someone steps up. It won't be the same one every day, but there's always gonna be someone."

"Yeah," we all murmur. Smiles come my way from all around the room. I give them a tight smile back.

"You guys have earned the week off," he says. "Let's get back here on Friday refreshed and ready to go. The next game won't be easy. Gateway's tough. But we're 4-2. This is our year!"

We cheer. He puts his fist out into the center of the room. We crowd around to put ours in next to it. All of us chant together. "One…two…three…Firebirds!"

Most of the team starts to get out of their uniforms. Gerrard, Carson, Charm, and I go to the training room to see Fisher. To my surprise, Pike lumbers along behind us, Kodi tagging along behind him.

Fisher's right thigh is wound up in a tight white bandage that's showing spots of red. We can all smell the blood in the room. No matter how many times you see or smell it, it still makes you flinch.

"Hey, guys," Fisher says. He lifts a paw, slowly, and his eyes look just a little unfocused. The team doc, a quick otter, slides over to us and says something softly about painkillers and taking him to the hospital, then slips back to taking care of Jaws, who's just come in from the interviews to get one of his legs worked on. Typical stuff, especially for a running back. Jaws probably has

about six or seven good years left, barring injury, but of course, most running backs retire due to injury before they get too old to run. There are three or four other guys on tables, just usual nicks and dings. No other injuries as major as Fisher's.

"How's it feeling?" Charm asks. "Y'know, guys your age don't heal so fast."

Muscles stabbed and cut. Nobody heals fast from that. I straighten and bend my leg, appreciating the working muscles.

"Oh, it's fine now." Fisher lifts the leg tentatively. "I'll be out a week...or two...that's what Doc says." He doesn't respond at all to Charm's joking tone. The stallion looks at me, a bit worried.

"Did you call his wife?" I ask the trainer. He shakes his head.

The other guys stay around Fisher while I call Gena and tell her Fisher's okay, just going to the hospital to get his leg worked on. By the time I hang up, the team driver's arrived along with a paramedic. We tell Fisher we'll see him soon.

I go to my locker and strip most of my uniform off, unable to get the image of Fisher's vacant eyes out of my head. A lot of the guys are just getting out of the shower, but there are some still in there. Colin and one of his friends give me a look, walking back to their lockers. I see them muttering, and there's no Fisher to stand up for me. Loneliness washes over me like a wave, in combination with the exhaustion from the game. I lean against the locker, pulling out my phone to text Lee. White fur crowds my vision, and I look up at Pike.

The big bear's heading for the shower, naked with a towel draped casually over his arm. "Hey," he says. "Just wanted to say, uh...you looked good out there."

"You too." I nod to him.

He tilts his head. "You're gonna get that every game."

"Probably."

His eyes flick across the room, to where Brick is dressing. "I wouldn'ta done it," he says. "I mean, it ain't anyone's biz, right?"

I shrug. "Some people make it their biz." I type to Lee, *Pike*

talking dunno Y.

He thinks about that. “I guess there’s nothin’ you can do then. Just makes it harder for all of us.”

“Steez says if they’re focused on getting me, it makes them weak somewhere else. We gotta hit that.”

“Oh.” He rubs his whiskers. “Yeah, I see that. So maybe it’s a good thing.”

Lee texts back, *Say you support team.* I grin and say, “I just want the team to win.”

He looks like he knows that’s a stock answer. I go on, to show him that I mean it. “It sucks about Fisher, but I’m glad we’ve got you to fill in.”

His expression darkens. “Glad you stood up for him. Those fuckers—”

“Miski!” Coach barks. Pike gives me a nod and heads for the shower as I turn. Coach is striding toward me. “There’s reporters waiting to talk to ya.”

“Me?” My phone has a few text messages, but nobody said they were waiting, and—oh, the fight.

“Hit the shower and get out there or it’s twenty-five K for avoiding the media.” He growls to show what he thinks of the media fine.

“I’ll hurry up.” I strip off my jock and grab a towel, hurrying for the shower. On his way out, Gerrard reminds me the defense is going out for drinks and dinner, and I tell him I’ll join if I can.

Ten minutes later, I walk out into a group of fifteen reporters and camera crew, just finishing up with Brick, all wanting to know what happened with the boar. When Brick sees me, he holds up a hand and says, “Give us a minute.”

“What’s up?” I say.

He looks angry, but not at me. “Sorry,” he mutters.

“Bout what?” I snort.

He glances back at the media guys, who are all watching us avidly, the canids perking their ears. He whispers. “What I said.

Old habit. Don't mean nothin'."

I'm genuinely puzzled. Is he apologizing for knocking down the guy who gored Fisher and taunted me? Then I play it back in my head and realize he must be apologizing for calling the guy a 'faggot.' "Oh, hey," I say, "if you knock down an asshole every time you do that, I'm cool with it."

He flashes me a bear's wide grin. "Deal." Then he walks back to the locker room, leaving me to deal with the reporters.

It's not as big as the other press conference, I tell myself. Even so, I'm not prepared for their first question. It's about the boar, of course, but not the thing with Fisher. It's about the fight he and I had, the mouthing off. Was it homophobic?

Really, I think? They want to hear about that, not about the goring? "Yeah, it was," I say, and they love that, but then I think about what Brick said.

"Did that make you angry?"

"It's no big deal," I say. "Guys say stuff, in the game. It doesn't really mean anything."

They keep pressing, making it out like the boar is some kind of gay-bashing foaming-at-the-muzzle rapist. By this time, I've remembered the training we got about media exposure, which was to never talk crap in public about other players. The last thing you need is to give them motivation to come after you. In this case, it probably doesn't matter because the asshole hates me anyway, but I still limit myself to calling him 'unprofessional.' I try to make it sound dirty, but I'm not sure I succeed.

Coach comes to get me after about fifteen minutes, saying, "Okay, boys, that's all the time we got. Miski's got a week off, starting now."

The reporters don't argue too much. Coach keeps me in the room as it empties, one strong paw on my arm. "It's gonna be like that every game," he says. "You're gonna have to keep it together."

His yellow eyes search mine. I feel exposed, vulnerable. I have to resist the urge to turn my head and expose my throat. "I know."

“Can you do that?”

He has a way of asking that isn’t really asking. What he’s really saying is, “I know you can do it and I want you to tell me you can do it.” So I nod my head and tell him I can.

“During the week? Can you respect your teammates? Leave the media crap where it belongs?”

My first nod is hesitant, the second more firm. “Yeah.”

He smiles a long, wide smile. “Good,” he says. “You’re a football player. Don’t lose sight of that.”

I’ve got a warm glow in my chest as I walk out of the building, glancing across the parking lot to where Charm, Pike, Kodi, and three or four other guys are standing talking to a bunch of girls. I get my phone out to tell Lee I’m on my way home, but before I can dial, Charm yells, “Hey! Gramps!”

I like that he hasn’t changed my nickname. I turn, expecting him to be asking me to choose between two girls for him. He’s got three around him now, a sleek brown rat, a stocky lioness, and a tall hare, all three with chests the size of watermelons. I’m sizing them up as I walk toward him, but he points me over to two flat-chested girls, a vixen and a leopardess, leaning against a fence. They perk up as they see me coming towards them.

“You got your own groupies.” Charm’s grinning fit to bust. He’s got one arm around the hare and one around the lioness, but he’s looking right at me.

That’s silly, I think, didn’t they hear? But then I get closer and I see they’re both boys, just dressed in tight tops and slim-fitting pants, and the fox has some kind of pink scarf knotted around his neck. Somehow they look like women even though they’re not really wearing women’s clothes. Must be the way they carry themselves. I raise a paw. “Hi. Uh, you want autographs?”

“No,” the fox says, “but I’d love to hold your pen.”

He sidles up to me while the leopard hurries to get just as close. “If you need to unwind after the game,” he says, flexing his arm so I can see the rippling of his muscles, “I can help you relax.”

I step back and hold up my paws. “Look,” I say, “thanks, but, uh, I’m heading home.”

“He’s taken.” Charm’s come up behind me, all three girls in tow. “Got a boyfriend.”

“Not a problem,” the leopard says. “I’ll do you both.”

“Slut,” the fox hisses.

“Hey,” I say. “Why don’t you two go off together and have fun?”

They look at each other and laugh. “You don’t get how this works. That’s so cute.” The fox grins, sharp green eyes reminding me almost of Lee. Almost. But the scent is all wrong. It’s more desperate, less sophisticated. He’s not younger, just less mature.

The leopard, now, he is younger. I can smell his arousal much more strongly. Maybe it’s a feline thing. Part of me wonders, for a brief second, *what would that be like*? But it’s not a big part of me, and it’s squashed by the part that wants to get home to Lee as soon as possible.

“I know how this works,” I tell the leopard, ignoring the fox. “How this works is, I go home to my boyfriend, and you guys go chase someone else’s tail.”

When I turn, I see Pike chatting with a big-breasted horse—do all the girls who hang out here have big tits? When he sees me looking, his expression turns sour. I roll my eyes, like, *I know, can you believe it?* He shrugs minutely and goes back to his horse.

“I’ve sucked off football players before.” The fox hasn’t given up, following me across the parking lot. The leopard is strolling away, his tail flicking from side to side.

“Lion Christ, kid, take your pink scarf, go home, and wait for puberty.” I really hope that’ll do it.

It doesn’t. He follows me all the way to my car, and there he grabs my arm. “My name’s Argonne,” he says, drawing himself up. He’s a half-foot taller than Lee, but he still can’t look me in the eye. “And this is an ascot, and it’s pamplemousse, not *pink*. It’s fashionable. To those of us who’ve moved beyond puberty.” His

eyes flash. “I’m offering you a no-strings-attached blow job. And I’m really good.”

He flattens his ears at the look on my muzzle. “So am I,” I say, as quietly and dangerously as I can manage. “And I don’t want to be in the paper again for assaulting someone,”

Finally, he gets it. He lifts his paw and backs away with a haughty expression. “Your loss.”

Is this what I have to look forward to after every game now? I didn’t even know there were gay groupies. Though, come to think of it, I remember now a guy talking about getting head, and being really vague about the ‘girl.’ It was when I first joined the Firebirds, almost a year ago. Who was it? A fox, maybe? And some feline? It wasn’t Fisher, I know that much. He said he gave up the girls on the road back in ’05.

Poor Fisher. I pull out of the lot, seeing in my head the confused look in his eyes from the painkillers, the blood along his leg and on the boar’s tusk. As much as I want him to come back, I don’t see it. Not this season. Maybe for the playoffs, if we make it, but it depends how much of his muscle the tusk dug into. It was still bleeding, through all those bandages. That’s not good.

Nothing I can do but wait. I can call Gena when I get home, but she’s probably already at the hospital. I turn onto Main and pass a slowpoke, ducking back into the right lane to make my turn. Lee’ll be waiting for me, or will be there soon, and then tomorrow we fly up to see my family. My palms sweat on the steering wheel. It’s going to be fine. They’ll love Lee. I’ll talk to my dad. He won’t like it, but at least he’ll talk to me again. We can work on them slowly. Then maybe tackle Lee’s parents.

When I smell fox in the elevator of my building, I know this time it’s not just my imagination. He won’t surprise me like he did the day before the press conference. He has a key now, so instead of sitting in the hallway outside my door, he’s sitting on my couch, playing UFL Football 2009. And of course, he’s not wearing anything but a wide smile.

He pauses the game to get up. You know, I keep hearing from my teammates how their friends are all starting to put on weight. Lee works out a few times a week, and it shows. He's maybe a little more filled out than he was in college, but he doesn't have a gut. He watches me, tail swishing, and waits for me to say something, angling his hips to show off the line of his body, the curve of white against red around his chest, down his side, to his thick sheath and the sac hanging below it.

It's so funny. I've just come from seeing half a dozen other naked guys, and none of them made my breath short, or my heart race, or my groin tingle and heat up. I strip my shirt off and walk toward him. "Who's winning?" I nod at the TV.

He grins. "Dragons." His tall ears cup forward toward me.

I reach out and pull his body against me. The curve of his spine and the softness of his fur are the only things that feel better in my paws than a football during a game. His sharp musk in my nose, the arch of his tail as my fingers slide down to his rear, the sound of his breathing, with the slight whistle through his long muzzle, and his slender fingers holding me firmly, all those are a bubble in which I'm safe from the rest of the world.

I nuzzle between his ears. "How was the game?"

He pushes his nose into my chest fur. "Good footwork. And good paw work." He slides his fingers inside my pants.

I wriggle my rear. "Paw work?"

"Getting in the face of that boar. How's Fisher?"

I tickle a finger under his tail. "He's in the hospital. You really want to talk about him now?"

His nose pokes into my right biceps. "Mmf."

I flex, pulling his hips hard against me. I can feel his length at my thigh, just as he rubs his stomach into mine. "I thought you'd tell me not to let them get to me."

"He attacked a teammate. Going after him after that was about the best thing you could do. It'll be harder for them to hate you now."

“I don’t know about that. Without Fisher…” Colin and Zillo still look the same, and I think about Pike’s expression outside the stadium, when I was getting rid of the leopard and fox.

Lee exhales into my arm fur, making me shiver. “So you have to stand up for yourself.”

“I’ve been doing that. Fisher’s a vet, they respect him.”

“They’re gonna respect you more now.”

I squeeze his rear. He tightens it and huffs a chuckle. “I’m serious,” he says. “It makes a difference. When they think about you, they’ll think about that instead of this.”

‘This’ is his fingers gliding around my hips, following my stripes until his claws just brush the base of my sheath. I suck in a breath through my teeth. His smile melts my tension as if it were ice under the Chevali sun. I reach around to tease his erection with a fingertip, and then lower my paws, cupping his rear. He knows what’s coming and tenses for it, keeping his paw against me as I lift him and carry him to the bedroom.

For now, everything else is gone. I’m not worried about the team, about my parents, about the fine I’m sure to get from the league. His weight in my arms, his musk in my nose, the urgency in my groin, the warmth in my heart, those are my world.

I drop him to the bed. He leans back on his elbows, showing himself off. I smile at him as I strip my pants off, and pounce atop him wearing only boxers. And soon enough, not even that.

Part II

5

Home Game (Dev)

We're about a half hour from my parents' place in Lake Handerson. Lee's driving, and I'm wedged into the passenger seat of his Civique. He asked what to expect in the town, and I didn't really know what to tell him. It's got a mall, a hospital, two movie theaters, and a library. There's a public pool for the otter and beaver community, but we preferred the lake. It's not Lake Handerson; that's the name of the town. There used to be a Lake Handerson, but it dried up, and now 'the lake' is Lake Farrow, an hour away. I used to fish there, and skinny-dipped once or twice in high school.

"See, you were gay even back then," Lee says when I tell him this.

"It wasn't even about that," I say. "We just didn't want to get our clothes wet, and when you go drinking beer by the lake, you don't bring swimsuits."

"Not if you want to see each other naked, you don't."

I lean against the passenger door and look at him, half-grinning. He's watching the road but his ears are swiveled my way. "It's just sheaths. We see them all the time in the locker room."

His grin stretches slightly wider. "You're telling me you never popped a boner swimming around naked in the lake?"

"I was a teenager! Nobody could see anything anyway." Though I have a clear memory of one of our receivers, an otter—fast

enough for high school, not for college—floating on his back with his erection just lying on his stomach, dark against the moonlit white fur. “I’m only gay for you, fox.”

“Aw. That’s probably for the best, with the locker room showers and all.” His words are jokey, but his tone is soft and his smile is, too.

We’re quiet, as I remember my high school and he watches the highway. We pass a sign for Cross’s Coffee, and his eyes follow it. “At least it’ll be too remote for Starbucks,” he says.

“Mom said they’re putting one in at the mall,” I tell him with some satisfaction. “I really want to see it.”

He sighs exaggeratedly. “You can go do that on your own. I’ll stay and bond with your parents. I’ll teach them to hate corporate coffee.”

I recline. “Dad already hates it.”

“See? We’ll bond like Krazy and Glue.”

Which is which, I wonder? I point to a sign at the exit we’re passing. “He likes Dunkin Donuts coffee, though.”

Lee sticks out his tongue. “I can choke that down, if they make some.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Ogleby’s been calling for a while, but I’ve been ignoring him. He’ll leave voicemails, and I’ll deal with them after this trip. My parents are going to be stressful enough without me worrying about endorsements and commercials and whatever else. I stick a paw in my pocket and thumb the ‘ignore’ button, looking at the signs on the highway flying by.

I haven’t been this way in years. When I was at Forester I covered it once a month, until senior year. Until I met Lee. I remember that faded billboard for Steve Johnson’s Trout Shack. Nobody else bought the space, going on ten years now. Even the names on the exit signs are a familiar litany: Goddlefield, High Water, Meckonion.

We have to pass High Water before we see our first sign for Lake Handerson: 35 mi. “Half an hour,” Lee says, glancing at his

speedometer.

"Yep." I fold my paws over my stomach, rearrange my feet, shift my weight in the seat. Lee isn't as visibly nervous, but his tail is twitching in the rear footwell, back where he thinks I can't see it. "Be there in time for dinner."

"There's no freaky Lake Handerson delicacies I need to prepare my stomach for, are there? Like spider pie or snake kebabs?"

"Sometimes when the field rats get all into things, Mom makes a stew," I say.

He raises an eyebrow. "Oh, sure, I had rat stew all the time growing up. I bet she doesn't make it like my mom did, though."

"Did your mom make it with the bones?" I grin, waiting for his comeback, but he doesn't answer, looking as though he's remembering something. After a moment, I cough and get serious again. "I think she said she's making a steak dinner. It's my dad's favorite."

"I can manage steak," he says. "Maybe it'll put your dad in a better mood."

"Steak does that. Beer works, too. And a good poker game. And Mom's pumpkin pie, but she only makes that at Thanksgiving." Or I could go back in time and untell him that I'm gay.

"How traditional."

"You have no idea. Mom goes all out. Turkey and stuffing, of course. Some years she makes regular stuffing, sometimes cornbread. She always asks us which one we want, and we always say, 'both.' She never does both, though. Sweet potato casserole, cranberry relish—"

"Out of a can?"

I frown. "Does it come in a jar?"

He laughs. "Go on."

"Pumpkin pie, green beans and fried onions. And lots of family, of course. Asking what I'm going to do when I'm done 'this football thing.'"

"You'll have an answer, this year."

“Yeah.” I grin, thinking of Uncle Roger’s refrain: *but it’s not a career*. Even when I was on special teams as a backup corner last year, they didn’t really get how special that really was. *Special teams is not about skill*, Dad said. *Anyone can block kicks, cover punts.* I made some good tackles, but I wasn’t starting at corner, which was my college position, and so I still hadn’t “made it,” then.

I tell Lee about some of my relatives, about the traditional pick-up football game, about how good it feels to sit around the house digesting the huge meal. I leave room for him to tell me his favorite things about Thanksgiving. I know it’s hard for him, but there’s got to be something he liked about his family holidays. I wait, and wait some more. He keeps his eyes fixed on the road, his muzzle shut.

I sit in silence until I spot another landmark. “There’s the drive-in.”

Lee’s eyes slide over to the huge screen half-hidden behind bright red and yellow clouds of leaves. “Skinny-dipping, turkey and pumpkin pie, drive-in…did you go to high school in the nineteen-sixties?”

I grin. “Felt like it, once I got to Forester.”

“Did you make out with your first girlfriend at the drive-in, too?”

I rest a paw on his knee. “Don’t be jealous.”

“Oh my God, you did.” We’re well past the drive-in now, but he looks to the side of the highway. “What movie was it?”

“Who remembers? Some James Bond thing, I think.”

“Who was she?”

“Doesn’t matter. You know, doc, once I got to Forester I stopped thinking about high school.”

“You don’t remember your first kiss?”

I squeeze his thigh. “Who said that was my first kiss? That was Marcia Long. She was a cougar.”

He exhales. I can see him getting tense again, even without looking at his tail. The sign for Lake Handerson says ‘11 miles.’ I

start to wonder if this was all a mistake. What if my parents hate him? I mean, I don't think they could, but what if they do? My claws flex, not enough to touch his pants, but enough that I feel it. I pull them back in.

"Did your parents like her?" It's like he's reading my thoughts. He's quiet, nervous.

"Yeah, right. Mom said her dress was ugly. Made her cry."

He turns his head quickly, during a flat stretch of highway. "I promise I won't cry if your mom doesn't like my dress."

"That's great," I say. "Make a couple jokes like that in front of my parents, it'll relax 'em right off."

"You told me to be myself, stud."

He is being himself, as sharp and quick as I know him. All I am is a blunt instrument. "I love you."

"Love you too."

I let my claws extend, just enough that he can feel them through his pants. "I mean...you matter. I want you with me."

He tilts his head. "I figured if you didn't, you'd have gotten out at the rest stop back there and hitched a ride with that cute cougar trucker."

I press harder, through his jeans and against the skin. He yelps theatrically and lays his ears back. "My family's going to love you," I say, "because I do, and they'll see that."

He doesn't say anything. But a moment later, his paw wanders over to mine, and holds it. I squeeze back with as much confidence as I can muster.

The silence is much nicer for the last fifteen minutes of the drive. I guide him around landmarks, places where my childhood was shaped in torn fur and twisted ankles, endless games of hoops and sandlot football and tag and baseball, and teachers and classes. There are too many memories to share them all at once; I point out the school where I spent four years, the football field where I got my first touchdown, the movie theater where I worked for a summer, and my dad's auto shop. Lee doesn't say anything, just

takes it all in, nodding. He spends a little more time looking at the auto shop, but just when I think he's going to make a remark, he speeds up and turns the corner.

Bringing him here is strange. It's part of me, and I want him to know it, but at the same time, he doesn't feel like he belongs here. He's part of my new life, and all this, all around, is my old. It's past, but I still feel its pull. The movie theater, with the busted door on the employee bathroom that you have to close with baling wire; I wonder if they've fixed it. The school, the smell of the office and the classrooms. And of course, the auto shop, where Gregory and I spent late afternoons watching the mechanics take apart cars, neither of us as interested as my father wanted us to be. It pulls like a magnet, but I force myself to look ahead.

It's about five-thirty when we pull up outside the white two-story house that I would know anywhere. It's like one of those dreams where you know a place but don't know how you know it. It always feels like that, ever since I went away to college. My life has come so far from this place that I don't feel I belong here, and yet there's a part of me that always will, a part that is lashing my tail and tapping my finger on the door handle as the car rolls to a stop behind my father's.

Lee sits behind the wheel as I push my door open, staring ahead of him at the black pickup, or maybe just at the street, or maybe at something inside his own head.

"Fox?" I ask. "You coming?"

Another second, then he gives a quick nod and opens his door. He smiles at me as he gets out. "Right behind ya."

He climbs the front stairs behind me, true to his word. It's comforting to feel him there, but also disorienting, something out of place. It makes me hesitate at the door I've walked through so many times. I rest my paw against the door frame, one claw scraping at chipped paint. Should I knock? Am I allowed to just walk in? The last time I was here, in May, I met my father at the shop and we came home together. The more I stand here, the more

nervous I get. I pull a chip of paint off the frame.

Lee fidgets behind me. I reach for the handle and pull the door open. “Hi! I’m here,” I call, stepping in.

The living room is spotless, teflon couch and coffee table squared to each other, with my father’s large wooden chair to one side. They’ve changed the pictures in the living room, I notice. The big one used to be a family portrait, over the fireplace; now it’s a landscape. But there are pictures of me and Gregory on the side table, Gregory at his law school graduation, me holding up a Dragons jersey on draft day. Nothing of me on the Firebirds. Beneath the smells of steak and potato, our family smell permeates the house, a scent that is at once comforting and unsettling. It’s part of me, from a life I’m not a part of anymore, like my body remembering how to run one of those college plays that doesn’t work in the pros.

I take all this in, the new stuff and the things that haven’t changed, so that I’m not aware until Lee brushes my tail that my mother is standing in the kitchen doorway. Over a flowery blue print dress, she has on an apron and a smile, which remains fixed even as her eyes flick to Lee.

His ears are slightly back, but he’s smiling too. I walk over to Mom and hug her, and she hugs tightly back and presses her muzzle hard against mine. “Hello, Devlin,” she says. “Did you have a nice trip?”

“It was good.” I start to turn toward Lee.

“It’s been a long time.”

“Just since Easter.” I step back. “Mom, this is Lee.”

She meets his eyes. Lee puts his ears up and brightens his smile. Mom draws in a breath and then steps forward stiffly, the smile locked in place. “I’m Duscha. So nice to meet you.”

Lee’s smile looks sincere even though I know he can put on a fake one easily. “It’s a real pleasure getting to see where Dev grew up,” he says, “and I can see now where he gets his good looks from.”

Mom doesn't quite know what to do with that, but when Lee bows and touches his nose to her paw, her smile thaws. She clasps his paw and says, "Devlin hasn't told us much about you."

As if they'd asked. "I—"

Lee cuts my protest short. "He talks about you quite a bit," he says. "I'm so happy to finally meet you."

It's nice to see the smile reach her eyes. She offers us a drink, and talks about Gregory, who was home for the weekend, I guess, and just left last night. She loves his commercial, of course. I admit that we haven't seen it, and that sends us out into the living room so she can pull it up on the DVR.

I sit on the couch. After some thought, Lee sits at the far end. He rubs the teflon under his paws, and when he looks over at me, I extend my claws and show him how they just glide over the surface without damaging it. He grins and nods understanding. And we have time to do all this because my mother is struggling with the DVR remote as though it's a live creature trying to escape her grasp, and she's trying to find the right button to immobilize it.

Finally, she calls up Gregory's commercial, which ran in the middle of the football game. It wasn't ours; it was the Boxers and the Sabretooths, who are in first again. The commercial is right near the end. I see a couple plays I'd like to see again, as she's fast-forwarding, but she's so excited about the commercial, I can't stop her.

So we sit through it. Gregory's sitting behind a big fancy desk. He's wearing a suit and tie, looking very professional. I recognize him by appearance, but his voice is stiff and different. "It's not his desk," Mom whispers. He makes his pitch for his law firm, a small, independent partnership, and smiles for the camera, preening his cheek ruffs. His are more full than mine.

"The camera loves him," Mom says. She fumbles with the remote again, as they cut back to the game.

I exchange glances with Lee as the announcers say, "Game break! On the field in Chevali, there's been a bit of a scuffle, and a

player is injured." The coverage switches to our game for two seconds, and then the recording ends.

Mom turns to us and says, "Isn't that great?"

Lee's looking sideways at me, clearly waiting until I say something. "Um, sure." I curl my tail around behind me. Part of me wants to see Fisher's injury again, morbidly, to see what it looks like. I realize I don't have a clear memory of it happening.

"It's great," Lee says, and indicates the TV. "Did you see the rest of that fight?"

"How is that player?" Mom says. "It looked horrible."

"He's fine." Gena hasn't been in touch, but I assume I would've heard if something bad had happened. "Probably out for the season, though."

"He is out for the season," Lee says. "I talked to Gena."

"Oh, that's a shame. He was a friend of yours, right?"

"Still is." I scratch my muzzle, looking at Lee, who smiles at me. "Did you see my commercial?"

Mom looks down at her lap. "I think I missed it. I was making lunch in the kitchen and your father said it was coming on."

So they didn't feel the need to record that. But I haven't seen the commercial either, so I'm wondering if maybe it's just not a very good commercial.

Lee breaks the ensuing silence with a compliment about the living room. His posture looks strange; it takes me a minute to see that he's got his paws clasped together and his tail twitching behind him. Usually when he's nervous he holds his tail. I realize that he's holding back so he doesn't shed tail fur all over the clean couch and floor. At least it's not spring, when it's impossible for him to go anywhere without a cloud of fur trailing behind. I want to tell him he doesn't have to keep praising my mother, but she actually warms further when he does, and, incredibly, they talk for a good ten minutes about the landscape on the mantel. It turns out it's done by that Painter of Light guy, which Lee somehow knows a lot about, or at least enough to talk.

He relaxes, but I'm getting more and more tense. When I notice my claws tapping the fabric of the couch, I have to break into the conversation. "Where's Dad?"

I don't even get both words out before Mom says, "We should get your things from the car. You're here two nights?"

"We have to go to Port City after that," Lee says, while I'm deciding whether or not to ask the question again. "Dev's going to be on the Today Show."

"It's exciting, isn't it?" Mom stands. "Now, Devlin, you can have your old room, and your friend..." She looks at Lee, standing now and waiting politely. "Lee, right? Lee, you'll be in the guest room downstairs."

I stand, too. My tail thwacks the couch. "In the basement?"

"I made it up," Mom says.

Lee watches me. "Mom, you can't put him in the basement," I say. "It stinks down there."

His ears swivel to the side. "I have some NeutraScent," he says. "I know we—I have a strong scent."

"See?" I can't believe they wanted to stick him down there. Just over Christmas they were telling me they had a bad mildew problem. He'd go nuts, with his nose, or get sick.

Mom doesn't look at him. "Devlin, I've already made up the room..."

"Put him in Gregory's room," I say.

"Devlin..." Mom folds her paws together, but she doesn't extend her claws.

"It's made up, isn't it? I'll help change the sheets." I glance at Lee. "We'll help," I start to say, but for some reason his ears are even further down.

"I don't feel comfortable with another guest in your brother's room." Mom looks at Lee. "It's nothing personal."

"Lion Christ," I say. "Fine, I'll stay in Gregory's room and he can have mine. It's okay, I give my permission." Not like he hasn't been in my bed a hundred times. I'm going to explode from the

shit I'm holding back.

"I guess...that would be all right." Mom sighs. "I made up the basement."

"Let's get our things," I say to Lee.

Out at the car, we each grab our bags, and I slam the trunk closed. "This is off to a great start. I can't believe they wanted you to sleep in all that mildew."

He just shrugs, and starts walking back toward the house. I follow, coming up alongside without touching him. "Hey. What is it?" He shakes his head. I nudge him. "Tell me."

He stops, and looks up at me. "Why can't we both stay in your room?"

I rub my ears. "Mom doesn't want us to."

"If you want your parents to accept our relationship, you have to stand up for it. We're a couple. We should sleep in the same room."

"I just did stand up for you." I stare down at him. "I got you into the room next to mine. I can always come see you at night, after they go to bed."

"It's not about that. It's about getting them past this so they can see you're still their son."

"I'm not sure how smacking their noses with it will get them past it."

He sighs and turns. "It's fine, stud. Let's not rock the boat."

I stop him before he can get back to the house. "Don't do this. Not now."

He gives me a long look, and then says, "Okay," and hefts his bag over his shoulder, heading up the steps and opening the door without knocking. I shake my head and follow him. Only two days. We can do this.

Gregory's room has become less of a place where he lives, and more of a museum preserving his childhood. The debate team awards and model U.N. trophy from high school, shiny awards I used to envy; a commendation from the food shelter where he

volunteered. No note that he stopped volunteering after he'd gotten the commendation, of course. A scrapbook of newspaper articles from his high school and college career. I bet Mom still updates it. I decide not to look.

Weirdly, on his dresser is a picture of his high school girlfriend Clarisse, a tiger more gorgeous than a debate team captain should be able to get. She once told Gregory he could "do better" than me for a little brother. He dated her a year into college and then dumped her. My parents were heartbroken until they met his new girlfriend, just as pretty and smarter to boot.

They'll never put pictures of Lee up in my room. I'll have to settle for the real fox, in there now. I walk over there to see him.

My old room is more or less as I'd left it. No game balls—they're in my apartment in Chevali. The only post-high school picture is the black and white newspaper version of the picture in the living room, of me on draft night. My science project is still there on my old dresser, a lame cardboard poster describing how the shape of a football is more aerodynamic than a baseball. Next to it, there's a photo of me with the Forester Team at the playoff game we lost, looking exuberant and confident.

Lee's put his bag on the bed and is sitting there on the phone doing his Lauren Bacollie voice. As I come in, he holds up a paw for me to wait, and says, "He was sticking up for his teammates. It has nothing to do with his sexuality."

There's no question who he's talking about, not when he looks up at me with a smile. The smile and voice, I gotta admit, kinda get to me. I adjust my pants and close the bedroom door, leaning against it. I study the curtains. Mom's changed them, and the bedsheets to match, a blue-green flower pattern that is pretty, in a bland sort of way. Lee, even in his earth-tone clothes, stands out against them, a bright, vivid orange. "They've always been very supportive," he says. "Mister Kinnel, I have to go. It's been a pleasure talking to you, as always."

He clicks the phone shut and stands. "Just that reporter who

was at your press conference," he says, and looks around. "Nice room."

I grin. "He still thinks you're a girl?"

He nods. "He wants some good quotes from you so he can write up articles and sell them."

"You know what kind of things I say. Just make up something nice and bland. Why did you call him now?"

Lee shakes his head. "He called me."

"You gave him your number?"

He shrugs and gives me a hint of a foxy smile, stepping closer. "He knows Corcoran. The better he thinks of you...whatever I can do..." His sentences break up as he trails a paw along my stomach.

I reach out and put my paws on his hips. "You don't have to stop doing the voice."

"Oh, don't I?" He does it low and husky.

"Mmmmm." I pull him close and hold him there, and the rest of the room just kinda fades away in the wash of his scent and the tickle of his fur against my nose.

He nuzzles against me, and turns his head to look at my science project. "I always wondered why footballs flew," he says, still in the voice.

I chew at his ear. "God dammit," I say. "I was sixteen."

He squirms against me. "And very—hee!—studious!"

I tug at his ear, feeling the predatory and protective impulses rise up and tighten my arms, pulling him against me. He hooks his paws into the waist of my pants, and I can feel the same urges rising in him. Specifically, rising in a certain part of him that presses up into me, matching the hardness I'm pushing into him. I growl into his ear, and he chews at my shirt just over my right pec. I pant, hard, and then when I open my eyes, I see my graduation picture on my dresser, and I remember where I am.

I push him away. We both stand there, panting, looking at each other. He opens his muzzle to say something and then perks his ears. I hear it a moment later, humming in the hallway outside. I

scramble away from the door to stand beside the dresser, as Lee saunters back to the bed to make a show of rooting through his bag.

Mom knocks on the door. “I have towels,” she says. She had to pass Gregory’s room to get here, so she must have seen I wasn’t in it.

I reach out and open the door. “I was just showing Lee some of my stuff,” I say. I hope Mom doesn’t hear his little snort of amusement.

She sets a folded towel on the dresser. I recognize it; it’s one of the ones we’ve had around forever, that’s always been in the back of the linen closet, so faded it’s become a generic worn beige color. “Dinner’s just about ready,” she says.

“Okay, we’ll come down.” I don’t demand a nicer towel for Lee.

Mom smiles. “Oh, just in a few minutes. Devlin, I left your towel on Gregory’s bed.”

“Thanks.” Lee’s tail swishes as he grabs his music player out of his bag and sets the bag on the floor. He checks to see that Mom’s gone before he bends down to sniff the bed.

He pads back over to me and starts to close the door. I hold it open. “We’ve got a few minutes,” he says. “And your bed doesn’t smell enough like you yet.”

“Not now,” I say. “Let’s go downstairs.”

His eyes flash, but he doesn’t let the argument out. “Okay,” he says, and follows me down the stairs.

I show him where the plates and flatware are, and we set the table over Mom’s objections. It’s fun; Lee and I almost never eat in together, and when we do it’s just on paper plates. He has wine glasses, but that’s the only thing we have to wash. They’re actually nicer than the wine glasses we’re setting out here, but then, I’m fairly sure his wines are nicer than what Mom’s picked out here, too. If it’s not a holiday or special occasion, Dad just has beer and Mom has juice. I put a wine glass at Dad’s place, keep my fingers on it for a moment, then leave it there.

Lee sniffs at the wine, though, and says it smells good, smiling as he pours it out. Dinner smells great, all steak and potatoes and some kind of boiled vegetable. It makes my mouth water just thinking about it. Mostly the steak; Mom's never been great with veggies.

Dad still hasn't shown when Mom brings out a platter of steaks. She looks around, her brow creasing, and then goes back to the kitchen for the side dishes. Lee pads after her to help, and comes out carrying the bowl of vegetables. "Go ahead and sit down," Mom says, putting a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. She rubs her paws on her apron and walks out.

Lee looks after her, then at me. "Where should I sit?"

"Dad usually sits there," I say, pointing at the head of the table, "and Mom there. So either of these two."

"Don't you have a usual place?" He moves around to the chair to my left, across from my mother, leaving me across from Dad's place.

I shake my head. "Not really. This is fine." I sit down and stare at Dad's empty chair. Lee reaches for his wine, then pulls his paw back and sits down as well. He looks at me, and I force a smile, reaching out for his paw under the table. "It's gonna be fine," I say.

"Maybe I should sit there," he whispers, nodding at my place. "Looks like he could still reach me from here."

My laugh is a little too loud. I clamp down on it. I hadn't worried about Dad getting physical, not until now. I mean, sure, he hit me a lot growing up, but I was a kid. He's not going to take a swing at Lee. Especially not at the dinner table, in front of Mom. Probably. "Can't you just throw him to the ground or something?"

"Oh, sure." He's still talking softly. "I just thought it was bad manners to use aikido on your boyfriend's parents in their house."

"Not in this house," I whisper back. "Here it's just another way of having a discussion. Though I wouldn't call it 'aikido' in front of Dad."

The door to the den creaks. We can hear Mom's voice, but I, at

least, can't make out what she's saying. Lee's big black ears might, but he doesn't betray any indication. We hear the low rumble of response, and then the creak of the door again. There are no footsteps to listen for, but I can still feel the weight approaching, as if Dad's presence is pushing a wall of air in front of him. I'm excited and nervous, tail flicking from side to side. It's been months since I've seen him.

Mom comes back into the room first and takes her seat. Lee and I are both watching the doorway as Dad steps into it.

He fills the door frame. Lee will say later that I'm my father's son, but the first impression I have, the first impression I always have when I see him again, is of how big he is. He pauses there in the doorframe, surveying the room with a beer bottle in one paw. I see the way he looks when his eyes settle on Lee. Lee doesn't look away, but I see his tail go still and then curl, not beneath his chair, but upward. He straightens in his chair and then, slowly, stands.

"Pleased to meet you," he says. "I'm Lee."

Dad looks him up and down, with the same expression he had when I told him I was going to Forester. "I supposed there wouldn't be more than one fox in this house," he says, and then looks at me. "Hello," he says, and as I half-rise, he sits down. The bottle clunks onto the table.

Lee reaches for the vegetables, but I touch his arm to stop him. Mom, looking down at her plate, says, "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful."

We all murmur, "Amen." Nobody moves for a moment, during which Lee sneaks a glance my way. I try to figure out a way to communicate that we have to wait for Dad to take his portion first, and end up making some kind of weird half-jerk of my head toward him. Whether Lee gets it or not, he waits, and a second later, my father casually reaches out a paw and spears a steak on a knife. He drags it to his plate and then scoops a spoonful of mashed potatoes beside it. He doesn't bother with the veggies.

"Would you like a steak?" Mom asks Lee.

“Thank you.” He holds his plate up. When she’s given him a steak, she offers me one. Lee gives me a wide-eyed look at the size of the steak as he helps himself to vegetables. Mom almost drops my steak, trying to help Lee with the vegetables despite his protests. She doesn’t serve herself until the two of us have all our food, by which time Dad’s halfway through his steak, cutting huge chunks and chewing them with great concentration.

Nobody’s saying anything. Even in the little time Dad doesn’t have steak in his mouth, he shows no sign of wanting to talk. Mom kinda looks up at us from time to time, starting with her vegetables and chewing quietly. Just about the time I decide to say something, Lee speaks up. “This is really good steak,” he says.

“Good game yesterday.” Dad doesn’t finish swallowing his steak before cutting Lee off, talking across the table to me. Flecks of meat and saliva spray onto his plate. Lee’s ears fold back.

“Thanks.” I nod. “Didn’t do much.”

“Stood up for your team.” He points at me with the fork before stabbing another piece of steak with it. “That shut up Ivan good.”

I almost ask him what Ivan had been saying. “The guy went after Fisher. I had to go after him.”

“Never met a boar had more sense than you could beat into him.” Dad snorts. “Good right cross, that’s all they understand. Worth the ten grand.”

Mom is looking at Lee, but talking to nobody in particular. “The Horens are nice boars.”

“Ten grand?” I say.

“League fine. It is nothing. You keep playing like that,” Dad says to me, “and this other shit will all go away.”

“That’s what Coach tells me,” I say. Lee’s eating quietly, but his ears are still back. I can feel his temperature going up slowly. I want to reach over and pat him on the knee, but I don’t dare. I don’t even care about the league fine.

“Samuelson,” Dad says. “Never thought he’d make it as a coach. Not after what he did at Yerba.”

I should probably defend Coach, but I know where this is gonna go. I steel myself for the dismissive scorn that'll follow me saying that Coach isn't that bad, but I don't get a chance to experience it.

"Really?" Lee says, before I can open my mouth. His ears are back up, staring at Dad, looking determined. "'Cause I kinda thought it was the Yerba front office that put a crappy team on the field, drafting like a blind three-year-old and then refusing to pay for free-agent talent."

Dad started out staring down at his plate, then frowns at Lee, like he doesn't quite know what to make of that. Hell, I don't know what to make of that. Mom smiles behind a forkful of mashed potatoes. Lee's watching Dad, with his head tilted to one side. "I mean," he says, "look who they drafted from 01 to 06." And he rattles off six names, of which I know maybe two. None of them are still in the league, at least not starting.

When Dad doesn't respond right away, Lee lowers his head and takes another bite of steak. Dad watches him and finally says, "Did *you* play football?"

"Lee works for the Dragons," I say.

I'm watching Dad as I say that. I haven't told him, of course, so it's interesting to see the news sink in. "I didn't know they hired faggots," he says.

"Mikhail!" Mom says.

Lee's ears flick, but he just looks amused. "Sure," he says.

"I'm so sorry," Mom says.

"It's okay," Lee says. "It's catching on around the league." He looks at me, eyes glinting, but I don't have a chance to tell him not to go on. "I mean, Chevali does, too."

"Lee," I growl, as Dad's expression darkens. His paw clenches around his fork. The prospect of him taking a swing at Lee doesn't seem so remote.

“Sorry.” He apologizes quickly, mouthing to me, *he started it*. Before I can answer, he turns to Dad. “I work in the front office. College scout, northeast territory. I scouted Pineta and Booker, and wanted to get Seidel, but Millenport sniped him from us at the last

minute."

Dad's claws retract slowly. He goes back to eating his steak without saying anything. But five minutes later, in the middle of Mom talking about a sale at the local J.C.'s, he coughs, and says to the middle of the table, "Booker's pretty good. Barsey would've been better."

"Not my region," Lee says. "But you're right. We had to decide between him and Callahan, and the team thought we needed a quality tackle more."

Dad meets that with a grunt. "If they'd gotten one. They only played one decent game all year, and that was against you." He stabs the air toward me with a fork.

Thanks, Dad. At least he's not growling at Lee any more. I can't help being defensive anyway. "It was pouring rain."

"Football weather. Can't win in the rain, you got no business being out there."

"We beat Aventira in the rain."

"Two weeks ago? It was clear."

"Last year," I mutter. "When I was with Hilltown."

Dad observes that I didn't even play in that game. I did, on special teams, but I don't correct him. Lee knows I did too, but doesn't say anything. Not until Dad finishes his steak and decides to talk about the Dragons' draft again.

"So what was with the fuckup in the third round?" Dad puts down his fork, though he doesn't look at Lee. "Johns over Katt?"

"I don't really get that either," Lee says. "I wasn't there, so I don't know why they went with Johns. Our reports had Katt higher. I think it was going to be a sign-and-trade, but the other team backed out."

I watch them go from guarded jabs to guarded banter, talking esoteric Dragons trivia. I thought I knew all Dad's trivia, but I can only about three-quarters follow them. Dad doesn't drop his belligerent tone, but Lee holds his own, from this year's draft to last year's games to the all-time greats. By the time Mom gets up to

clear the plates, I'm not worrying about Lee being murdered in his sleep anymore.

We eat dessert in the living room, Dad in his chair and Lee and I on the couch, with Mom between us. Mom brings the bottle of wine in from the dining room after cleaning up, but only she takes a glass. The silence around the dessert is so awkward that when Mom says brightly, "How about a movie?" I leap at the offer as though she'd offered me a seven-year contract from the Firebirds.

Dad puts in a guy comedy called "Oh, Brother," about identical twin rabbits who take each other's place at work, in bed, and so on. We all kind of laugh at the same places, but for me, at least, there's an undercurrent of tension. Lee seems relaxed, but I can't always tell, not when he's focused his ears on the movie and his tail is curled carefully to one side. Dad sometimes looks like he's just staring through the TV, joining in the laughter late several times. When the movie's over, he stands up right away, before the credits are even done, waves curtly to us, and goes off to bed.

Lee and I are still wide awake, and so is Mom. She glances after Dad, but doesn't follow him upstairs. Instead, she turns to Lee and asks him about his work for the Dragons. So he tells her the story of Morty the scout, going to the combine with me, and getting the internship. When he talks about dropping out of school, I see his ears fold back, but his voice stays even.

"His parents did not like him dropping out at all," I tell Mom. "But he's done really well in his job." I leave out the part where they tried to coerce him into not taking the Dragons job by threatening to not pay for his education. My salary gave him the freedom to defy them. Most days, I think that was good.

"What do your parents do?" Mom asks Lee.

"Father's a financial advisor," he says. "Mother…I'm not sure."

"Is she a housewife?" Mom would like that; it would give her something in common.

"Sort of." Lee sighs. "She doesn't have to work, but she used to make crafts, and she wrote articles for women's magazines

sometimes."

There's a pause. Mom says, finally, "And now?"

Lee shrugs. "I don't know."

"Don't you talk to her?"

He shakes his head, slowly. "Small talk at holidays. Nothing serious since..."

"Not since they met me," I say.

His blue eyes meet mine. "That's not why."

Mom frowns, and says softly, "That must be hard on you."

"I get by." He clears his throat. "Having Dev around helps a lot."

I still get a twinge when I think about Lee cut off from his family. I can't imagine how he's okay with being so unrooted. But he's an independent fox, and it really doesn't seem to bother him much. So I grin, to take some of the heaviness out of the room, and say, "I hate when he makes me wear his mom's clothes."

Lee makes some kind of strangled noise between a cough and a laugh. Mom stares at me with eyes so wide the white is bigger than the iris. I hold up my paws. "I'm kidding! Kidding!"

Mom's eyes go back to normal, slowly. She shakes her head. "Devlin," she says. "Honestly."

"Sorry," I mumble, but I see Lee's tail twitching and I know that at least he found it funny.

"That's why I love him," Lee says. "Always saying the wrong thing."

Mom's ears flick, accepting Lee's words as casually as he delivered them. "He always has. This one time—"

I groan. "Not the airplane story."

Lee's eyes sparkle. "Oh, I haven't heard this one."

"I didn't know what it meant!" I curl my tail around myself.

Mom laughs, leaning forward. "He was six, I think, because Gregory was nine that year. And we were flying with them for the first time in years."

"It's the first time I remember flying," I say. "I didn't know

what it was about."

"And the stewardess asked if he wanted to come up to the cockpit to see how the pilots flew the plane. But Devlin was afraid to leave us. She tried again, and he yelled, 'No!'"

"You didn't make her go away," I grumble.

Mom laughs. "She was a young tiger. I thought it was funny. She put her paws on her hips and told Devlin he was a rude little boy." She turns to me. "And he called her a very bad name."

Lee arches an eyebrow. "What did you call her?"

I say the word, because I know Mom won't. "*хуэсос*."

Mom blushes, but doesn't lose her smile. Lee tilts his ears. "Khooe-sos?"

"He'd heard his father say it," Mom says.

"It's something Dad used to yell at the TV when one of the Dragons turned the ball over." I wonder if Dad said it, privately, during my press conference. It's hard to imagine him saying it without yelling. "I'll tell you later," I say, seeing the question in Lee's eyes.

"I scolded him, of course." Mom looks at me fondly. "I was mortified, even though nobody spoke Siberian around here."

"So you thought." I have a funny flush in my ears, still. I was six years old and I'm still embarrassed about it, eighteen years later.

"The *stewardess* spoke it." Mom has a paw to her mouth, smiling. She loves this story; it's the only time I've ever heard her acknowledge Dad's foul language. She also loves movies where grey-muzzled old ladies use modern slang and bad words. Also greeting cards with cubs dressed as adults. My first birthday after I was drafted, she sent me a card with a little tiger cub in a Dragons football helmet.

"She knew more Siberian than I did," I say. "She rattled off some long harangue at me."

"She said several things that were not ladylike," Mom says.

Lee laughs, his tail swishing behind him. "That's absolutely

adorable." He looks fondly at me, and I can't help but smile.

Mom looks between us. She hesitates, then says, "Betty Harnby's son brought home his friend last year."

We both look at her. "You remember Mike? The armadillo?"

I shake my head. "He was your brother's best friend in third grade for about a month. Until another boy got a Nintendo. Well, Betty didn't know what to do, but his friend, I think his name was Kevin. No, wait, it was Kiran. At any rate, he's a possum, and Betty said he was terribly polite. Well, none of us knew what to expect."

"Dressing in women's clothes?" Lee says. "Or in leather straps?"

Mom laughs, but a little nervously, I think. "Betty was just so surprised. She said she'd never seen Mike so happy, and that's what really decided it for her." And she smiles at me.

I try to cover up that I only just realized that she's talking about another gay kid in town bringing his boyfriend home. Fortunately, my cell phone goes off, giving me an excuse to be distracted. I expect to see Ogleby's number, but it's not one I recognize. "Sorry," I say, and walk out of the room to take the call.

It's Gerrard, oddly enough. "Listen," he says, "did you get my message about the ten K fine for the fight."

"No," I say. "But my dad told me."

"I just talked to Coach. The team's going to pay it," he says. "Don't worry about it."

"Really?" I exhale, and not about the money. "Didn't know they were allowed to do that."

"Coach went and talked to the front office. Officially, you're paying it, and in a separate unrelated event, the team is giving you a ten K bonus for extra media time."

"Media time. Got it." I grin. "Thanks."

"One more thing. I know it's the week off, but can you be at practice tomorrow?"

"Oh," I say. "I'm, uh, visiting my family."

"Til when? How about Wednesday?"

"I'm doing The Today Show Thursday morning. I guess I could

be back Friday." He doesn't answer right away. "Why?"

"We need to practice," he says. "With Fisher out, Pike doesn't give us as much mobility on that side of the line. We're gonna need to bring you up more to hit the running plays. We need more speed on your side of the ball and it has to come from you."

"Oh." I try to remember the timing of the show. "How about Thursday evening? I'll look at flights."

"You figure out your priorities," he says, and hangs up.

That's as much anger as I've ever heard from Gerrard. I realize it doesn't sound good, this whole skipping practice to do interviews and TV shows. But come on, it's only gonna be for a few weeks, that's what Ogleby and Lee and Coach all say. By the time Corey comes back, it'll all have blown over, and I'll be able to focus full-time on keeping my job. It'll be fine.

But somehow, I don't believe that enough to tell Lee when I go back in. He asks if it was Ogleby, and I tell him it was Gerrard just calling to ask when I'd be back at practice, which is technically true. I tell him about the team paying the fine. He just grins and says, "I thought they might."

It leaves me thinking about Fisher and his abrupt injury. How quickly could things end for me, if I get something similar? I go out for the season, lose my job to the returning Corey, and next year, who cares about me? I fidget while Lee talks to Mom. I'll look for a flight that'll get me back to Chevali Thursday afternoon, early. Make an effort to make it for practice.

We stay up a bit longer chatting with Mom about family: who's had cubs, who's got new jobs, who thought of moving to Chevali but it was too hot so they didn't (my aunt Stephanie and her third husband). By the time she goes up to bed, I feel at least a little more connected to the family again.

"You boys just turn out the light when you come up," she says from the stairs. "Your father and I will be up early, but don't let us wake you. I'll have breakfast ready when you come down, and then I thought we could go 'round to Baker's for lunch."

“Sure,” I say. We wave goodnight to her, and then it’s just me and my fox, alone in my parents’ living room.

“So how you doing?” he asks.

I glance at the stairs. “Good,” I say. “For now. Maybe you could avoid antagonizing Dad for the rest of the visit, though.”

He narrows his eyes. “He started it.”

“For God’s sake,” I grumble.

“All right, all right.” He holds up a paw. “I promise to try. But if he starts something again…”

“He’s always starting something. Just ignore it, let him think he’s right.”

“Is that what you want?” His blue eyes are dark with the living room lamp behind him.

“I just want to get out of here Wednesday without anyone going to the hospital,” I say.

“Hey.” Lee spreads his paws. “If he provokes me…” He holds his arms up in a kung-fu pose.

I stare at him and stand, looming over him. He shifts his paws to face me. “That goes for you too,” he says, poking his paws and swiping the air between us.

I reach down and grab him under his arms, lifting him off the couch. “Oh yeah?” I say.

He play-karate chops my shoulders. His tail curls around to brush my rear. “Don’t strain your back,” he says.

“Lifting you?” I snort a breath onto his chest ruff and resituate my paws, one around his back, one under his rear. He fits in nicely against me. “Maybe if you started eating more of those Jeffrey’s burgers.”

He sticks his stomach out. “You want me to get fat?”

“No.”

His breath and then his tongue are warm on my ears. “Good.”

I lick the underside of his muzzle and carry him up the stairs, all the way to the bed in my room. There, I drop him onto the sheets and lean down to kiss his muzzle. He presses up into the kiss

as I pull back. We look at each other, and then he pats the bed next to him. I shake my head. “Gotta get ready for bed.”

“Okay,” he says, leaning back on his arms.

I smile. “I’ll see ya later. Thanks for being here with me.”

There’s a hint of disappointment in his eyes, which makes me hesitate. I could close the door, I think, and Mom and Dad are pretty definitely asleep. The sound of their breathing has only gotten louder since my childhood, when Gregory and I listened for it before sneaking out. We could maybe be quiet. But it’s my room, and I never even had sex in it when I was dating in high school. Plus, with my parents just down the hall…I try to imagine holding him against me, thrusting under his tail. I can’t pretend I don’t get hard from it, but then part of me says, what if Mom and Dad wake up?

So I walk out, go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, and pad to Gregory’s room. The bed still carries his scent from the weekend. Surrounded by family, I fall into a light doze.

It’s only a light doze because it can’t be more than fifteen minutes later that it’s broken by the creak of Gregory’s bedroom door. The lights are off in the hallway outside, but there’s enough ambient light for me to see the outline of Lee’s tall ears and bushy tail as he eases the door shut behind him. His scent hits me all at once, and as I prop myself up on my elbows, I see the white of his underbelly almost glowing in the dim room. It extends down his hips to the tops of his legs, where a darker shape bobs in front of it.

“Lion Christ,” I hiss.

“Is this late enough?” he says softly.

“What the hell are you doing?” My heart beats fast.

He leans in. “Nobody’s awake but us. You’re just next door.”

“What if they get up?”

His smile is bright in the room. “I’ll wait ’til the hallway is clear.”

“What if someone comes in to check on me?”

He rests a paw on my sheath, unerringly finding it as though his fingers were following a scent. I want to tell him that just because it's hard doesn't mean I want to do anything, but I can't make the words come. "Then we'd better be quick," he says.

"Fox..."

I hear a plastic click, and then another familiar smell greets me. "I'll be ready in a second."

"No!" I grip his paw before he can squirt lube onto it. His fingers slide up and down my erection. "No, then we'd have to shower, and the smell would be all over."

He considers that, and then clicks the bottle shut. His paw comes to rest, lightly grasping me."So you want me to just go back to your room?"

I can always go to the bathroom and jerk off. God knows I've done that enough. I'm about to say yes when I see the shine of one of Gregory's trophies against the wall. It occurs to me that they are high school trophies, that this whole room is a high school student's room, and that jerking off in the bathroom is what high school cubs do. Fuck the bathroom. I'm an adult now, and I want my fox.

Plus, the next time I see my brother, I'm going to love thinking, hey, I fucked a guy in your bed.

I push the sheets off me. "C'mere," I say softly, wrapping a paw around his waist and pulling him onto the bed. He starts to stretch out over me, but I tug his hips up the bed until he's straddling my chest. I reach out and curl my paw around his erection, bringing the other under his balls to tease between his legs and cup his sac.

He stretches his torso out above me, looking down his muzzle, the smile back. I don't know where the bottle went, but both paws come down to cup my head. I pull the tip of his shaft down to my muzzle and wrap my lips around it.

In the back of my head, I know I'm still not real good at this. Most of the time, we have just one night together, and, well, why mess with what works? But during our week off the past couple

springs, we had more time to play around. “I do miss a big cock in my mouth,” he said. Then I had to do him after that, which didn’t work the first time. I get mellow after sex, and sucking cock is hard work, it turns out. But if I do him first, I’m worked up enough to get through it, and then he doesn’t care how mellow he is when it’s his turn. It’s funny, we never really talked about it. After that first time, I just said, “I’ll go first,” and we did it like that from then on.

So I pull him all the way in, and it’s good. I can’t really get into my own mouth anymore, just the tip, on account of working out so much, and anyway his tip is smooth and curved, not barbed like mine. I’m used to holding it in my paw, but it’s a whole different ballgame against my tongue. I seal my lips around it and rub with my tongue. I picked up that much from him doing me. He arches his back and I feel his tail twitching over my legs.

His knot presses against my fingers, down at his base. He starts to make a noise in his throat as my tongue slides up to his tip again, so I let him slide out long enough to whisper, “Shhh.”

He grins, tongue lolling out. “Let’s see you keep quiet when it’s your turn,” he says, but he clamps his muzzle shut.

I reach a finger back between his legs to press at his tailhole, and that gets him to arch his back all over again, his muzzle pointed at the ceiling this time. I dive down over his cock, working back and forth, starting to press in under his tail, squeezing against the expanding pressure of his knot.

He pants hard. I push my muzzle down fast, curling my tongue around his cock and tasting his musk. Funny how it overpowers the toothpaste, not unpleasant at all, because it’s him. I’m really getting into it, finding a good rhythm and pace, feeling his body dance on top of mine. The little shudders and jolts he gives with every lick, every poke of my finger, make me happy in a way that reminds me why I do what I do to be with him. It’s not just the sex, it’s the connection that makes my cock jump with every little twist of his sexy chest, my toes tingle every time his tail arches, and my heart flutter when his lips part and he sucks in a long breath.

I bring my knees up, my thighs against his rear, and move my paw to his tight, white stomach, pressing my fingers into the fur. He's gasping, panting hard now, and I keep my rhythm going, my tongue sliding along his shaft, getting coated in his musk. I exhale into his fur and pull back. His knot is hard and tight, a reservoir of pressure. I push down again sharply; he gasps, but I don't growl at him this time. Another push, another gasp and a squeak. I play with him, slowing the pace until I think I hear a noise outside. Then I go back to my regular rhythm.

He trembles, leaning back against my legs and thrusting into my muzzle. I hold him by the knot until I feel his legs trembling. He drops his paws to my shoulders and hunches over me, his hips pushing my muzzle back against the pillow, and only I hear the moan he traps in his teeth as his body convulses over me and floods me with his musk and his climax.

God, I leak a little bit myself. I hold him, swallowing all of it (*that* trick took a couple times to learn). His labored breathing as he comes, the tight curl of his tail against my legs, his body focusing all its energy on thrusting onto my tongue: I take all this in, closing my eyes.

Slowly, he relaxes. He pulls out of me, sitting back against my knees, and looks down. His black fingers dive between his legs to my boxers, finding my hardness. "Well, I should be getting back," he says.

I see the glint in his eyes. "You do what you gotta do." I grin and lick my lips. "I got you off pretty easy."

He chuckles. All the while, his fingers are slipping into my pants, sliding up and down my length. "I'm a guy," he says. "In my sexual prime. We come if you just look at us funny."

"How about you look at me, then?" I close my eyes. His thumb finds my leaky tip.

"Feels like I already did. Sheesh, you tigers are messy," he murmurs. "Let's get you cleaned up."

I lean back into the pillow. His weight shifts, and cool air

caresses my cock.

6

Tough Break (Lee)

I don't know why being in Dev's house makes me so horny, but it does. Maybe it's just being surrounded by the scent of him in his room, the feeling that I want badly to be a part of his memories here. Maybe it's just that we're together for two nights in a row. Whatever it is, it just adds to the usual afterglow I get from sex, so I'm not sleepy at all as I lean down to take his cock in my muzzle.

He's big, so I have to be careful with the teeth, but at the same time he likes when they graze his little barbs, so I've figured out how to do him by now. I still like having him inside me better, but this is not a bad compromise, given the circumstances.

I'm determined to get him to make some noise, after him shushing me, so I go to work teasing him a lot more than normal. Sometimes he gets ticklish around the tops of his thighs, but apparently not tonight, I discover. Too bad. I focus on licking up the pre he's already been leaking into his shorts and on getting him all the way into the back of my muzzle, where my soft tongue can rub against his sensitive tip.

It works, a little. He squirms and his tail lashes the bed, but he stays quiet. So I bring my paw up under his balls and press at the perineum, lifting his cock further so I can slide down on it, teeth flicking past his barbs. I can feel his tension in the powerful legs on either side of me when I spread my elbows to rest on those muscles. It's like straddling an active volcano, all the energy and

power under me, but I love that I can get those responses out of him, and I love that nobody else can, that he's never really shown any interest in any other guys. Only gay for me.

I don't suck him off very often, but he's not hard to please. I have him all the way up in my muzzle, and part of me wants to close my eyes, so I don't have to think about anything else, but I keep them open because I love to watch him. His long arms, that can push aside tacklers or pluck a football out of the air, stretch down and hold my shoulders in place.

That's fine. I can still do a lot, pushing down on his cock with my tongue, tugging on my way up, teeth sliding along his skin. I go slow, until he starts to squirm, and then I go slower. He's leaking in my mouth, the smell of tiger permeating my head. My paws press down on his abs just above his hips, feeling the tightness there, the ripples of pleasure that go through them.

I wonder if his brother ever made love on this bed. I wonder if he ever had a girl as good as me. I want Dev to make noise. I want him to have the best orgasm anyone's ever had in this bed, in this room. It's a hunger in me almost as great as the one boiling in him, that has him panting in harsh gasps and trembling with the effort of restraining his hips from slamming into my face. Just a little longer. I can feel the tension in him begging for release, but I won't speed up yet. Just a little longer.

His breaths come faster. He tries to push me down faster on his cock, but I have better leverage and I keep going slow. The harsh rasp of his breath is almost a moan. Almost. Almost. I take a long, leisurely suck on the way up and then thrust my head back down. I rub and lick up, and then he makes the sound, a low moan that reverberates in the room.

Warmth spreads through me. I bob faster. He moans again, and I go faster still, tail wagging hard. His fingers press into my shoulders. I smile inside, since it's not really practical for me to smile physically right now. And he comes, his body rising and hard around me, his cock spraying into my mouth until I have to

swallow. He keeps coming, with another moan, and I have to swallow again. I keep licking, but he's almost done at that point. So I keep licking, until his moan become a strained gasp and he yanks me off him.

All this time, even though I came ten minutes ago, I'm still as hard as I was the minute I shot into his mouth. My knot's down a little, not almost-painful-god-I'm-going-to-explode full, but still swollen; I run my fingers along it to make sure, just as Dev grabs me and pulls me up his stomach. He notices, too.

"Not again," he purrs. "M'jaw's sore. I'm not as good a *хуэсос* as you are."

I giggle. "Oh, is that what that means?" I kiss his nose. We brush lips, but no more.

"Wanna rinse out my mouth." He pulls himself up on his elbows and reaches for his boxers, halfway down his thighs.

I slide off him, because I'm feeling that naughty, and I push him down. "Let me. I think I saw some cups in the bathroom."

He looks down at my cock. "Fox, don't."

I flick my ears at him. "Don't worry. I can hear your parents, I'll be quieter than you will, and it'll be a lot easier to explain being naked in the bathroom than in your room. Well. Not easier to explain, just less embarrassing." He starts to protest, and I kiss his nose. "For you. I'll be right back."

"At least wait 'til you're not so..." He looks down my stomach again. "Showy."

I draw a paw up my shaft. The tip is still a bit sticky, so I lick my finger. "You'll be asleep by then. And you're no better," I point out.

He pulls his boxers up. I give the bulge of his erection another rub through the fabric, which is damp in spots. "Look, you don't want your parents seeing you with this in front of your boxers. If they by some chance wake up and see me, well, they already hate me."

"Mom doesn't."

I grin. His eyes are already drooping. “I’ll be faster than you, anyway. Just lie there.”

Before he can protest again, I pad to the door. I listen there and then, hearing no movement, slip out into the hall.

It’s dark and deserted. I get a little thrill being out here as exposed as I am, but I’m not stupid enough to cause trouble for Dev by getting caught. I can hear the breathing of both his mother and father, slow and regular, just like my parents breathed when I walked around naked in our house at night. And I’m not going to go downstairs, here, just across to the bathroom. I’m only really exposed for three seconds, padding to the bathroom and closing the door behind me.

I take a drink of water and fill the red plastic cup again. No sound in the hallway, but I still get a little thrill opening the door. Cup in one paw, the other on my sheath, I give his parents’ bedroom door a smile as I slip back into his brother’s room and close the door again.

Dev’s asleep, sprawled out on his brother’s bed. I sit and watch him for a moment, the rise and fall of his chest, and my tail swishes slowly behind me. I know this is his brother’s room, and I’ll be back in his in a moment, but it feels like we’ve done something important here. I mean, his parents would definitely not approve, but Dev chose me over the risk that we might be caught. He’s added this part of his life—our life—to his memories of his childhood home. Whatever else happens with his parents, and I’ve no idea which way that’s going to go, we’ve done that.

I get up, listen again at the hallway, and make it back to my room—Dev’s room—undiscovered. I’m still hard as I pull the sheets over me, but my knot’s gone down quite a bit. I rest a paw on my cock, rubbing gently and thinking of Dev, and that’s how I let myself fall asleep.

In the morning, I lie in bed studying Dev’s old room until I hear him moving around next door. There’s a lot of sports stuff, of course, a few little high school trophies, but they must have

redecorated since he left. I can't imagine he chose the floral print curtains, or the sheets that drape so nicely over my outline. I imagine him waking up in this bed each morning, going to school, a cute young tiger jock. Paws behind my head, I think of what it was like to live in this family, with a brother and his parents.

I like his mom. She's very genuine, very caring. She doesn't know quite what to make of me, but when she's not thinking about it, we get along great. His father—I don't know. He definitely doesn't like me. Football helps, a little, but I won't have much time to win him over. I don't know if there could ever be enough time. Dev expects a full reconciliation in two days. I'd settle for his father using my name and shaking my paw. Sometimes there are gulfs you just can't bridge. You have to recognize that, and make the best of it.

When I hear Dev moving around, I get up to beat him to the bathroom. I dust myself with scent rather than take a full shower, and slip out (wearing a t-shirt and boxers) just as Dev pokes his head out of his brother's room. "All done," I say, blowing him a kiss. "Meet you downstairs."

He grunts and hurries to the bathroom. I get dressed and go down to the kitchen, where his mom has prepared a nice egg breakfast with a kind of black bread. "My mother's recipe," she tells me when I sniff at it. It has a nice sour smell, and a warm, dense texture.

"Wow," I say around a mouthful. "Great." I'm still munching my way through breakfast when Dev makes it down the stairs and into the kitchen. He sits down at the table next to me but doesn't look at me, and when I swing my tail over to brush his, I don't feel it.

"Oh, black bread!" He perks up at that. I watch him devour two breakfasts worth of ham, eggs, and bread, talking to his mother about old school friends and neighbors. I chime in with a few questions, and everything seems okay. After breakfast, he says he has to look at plane tickets to change his flight back to Chevali. I'd

been looking forward to dinner in Port City with him, but football comes first, and I don't want to shake that up. He looks up the appointment Ogleby made with the Today Show and finds a flight that gets him back to Chevali by mid-afternoon.

His mother takes us out to have lunch with her friends the Bakers, an otter family. It goes pretty well. I'm introduced as a 'friend from football,' which forces me to deflect questions about how I work with the Firebirds. But overall they're nice people, and the wife at least picks up on our relationship, probably because I am more concerned about my quiet, withdrawn tiger than his mother is.

Then it's time for the mall. We pass high schoolers just getting out of school, so I ask Dev where he used to hang out (what I actually say is "where did you make out with your high school girlfriends," which makes him scowl and his mother laugh). He doesn't rise to the bait, though. His answers are short, and he spends a lot of time staring into space, or at the floor. I imagine he's still thinking about our little late-night tryst. But we're with his mom a lot of the time, and when we're shopping on our own, there are always people around, and I can't say, "hey, was all the oral sex in your brother's bedroom last night okay, are we cool?"

I do at one point ask, "You okay?" and he says yeah, he's fine, and he smiles enough that I would almost believe it. At least, I believe that he wants me to believe it, which means he's not mad at me, and that's enough for right now.

But the day already has a bit of a sour tinge to it. After we get home, his mother sets about cleaning while Dev and I go for a walk around the neighborhood. He lightens up a little, then, and though we start out talking about his childhood memories, we move on to other things, like his Today Show interview and all the calls he's been taking from Ogleby. I tell him more about Kinnel, too.

"He said he's gonna call Corcoran sometime next week and will ask about you. He wants to know if I can get any exclusive quotes."

"You just shouldn't talk to him," he grumbles.

"You don't want advance warning if you're gonna be traded?"

He sighs. We walk a few more steps. "Does he still think you're a vixen?"

"I think that's part of why he keeps talking to me."

His tail flicks back and forth against mine. "It's dangerous."

I bump him, curling my fluffy tail under his. "I fooled you."

"Not for long," he rumbles.

I give him a sweet smile. "Well, I'm not going to sleep with *him*."

He eyes me. "I know you make a good vixen. But he's a fox. It's dangerous."

I make a good vixen? I change the subject. "No more than sneaking around your hallway naked."

He looks around and then down at the ground. We keep walking, and when he doesn't reply, I say, "Oh, come on. You didn't think that was hot?"

He reaches around to scratch behind his ear. "God, yes."

"So?"

"I dunno. It was hot, and it was great, don't get me wrong. I just…couldn't we have waited?"

"I offered to wait," I point out.

"That wasn't fair," he says. "I really wanted it then."

I roll my eyes. Boys. "So I seduced you into it?"

"No," he says, and then, "Kinda. Maybe."

I bump his arm. It's got about the same effect it would on a house, but he humors me by bumping back lightly. "I thought you'd like doing it in your brother's room."

It's adorable the way his ears flick. "That's not the point."

I laugh. "So what's eating you?" I wink. "I mean, now."

"Nothing." He kicks an acorn about thirty feet.

I watch it roll to a stop. "You planning on going after Charm's job?"

"It's like…" He takes a breath. "Don't laugh at me."

"Promise."

“It’s like I outgrew my favorite pair of jeans. You know, I tried them on one morning and realized they don’t fit.”

I nod. “You feel like you’re a different person.”

“I’m the same person,” he says. “Just…different, because there’s this part of me that everyone knows about now, and my old life doesn’t…doesn’t fit around it.” He gestures in front of him with his paws. “I feel so stupid.”

I shake my head. “I know the feeling. When I go home now, I feel like I don’t belong there any more.”

“But I do belong here. I mean, not all of me, just part of me. That’s what’s weird. I wanted you to fit in with me, but instead I’m partly with you and partly with them, and it’s just…frustrating.”

I take his paw. He flinches, but I hold on. “Look,” I say, “the whole point of coming back here is so your parents get to meet me, right? It’s not all going to happen at once. Your father will still hate me, I’m sure.”

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“He hates the idea of me.” I squeeze his paw. “But when we’ve spent more time together, he’ll feel better. Your mom already likes me. At least she doesn’t want to lock me out of the house.”

“Course you get along better with Mom,” he says.

I stop walking. We’re about a half block from the house. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He looks at me, the afternoon sun bright in his eyes. “Mom’s more mellow. What?”

“Nothing.” I’m not sure what in that remark rubbed me the wrong way. Dev never really made any remarks about me being girly—not serious ones, anyway. We were always on an equal footing. But I make a good vixen? I get along better with his mom? “Nah, just took it the wrong way, sorry.”

“I wish Dad hadn’t had to work today.” Dev clasps his paws behind his back as we walk on, tail swinging behind him.

I don’t think Mikhail had to; he chose to. But I don’t say that. I want to get along with his parents and I want to believe they’re

trying to get along with me. So does Dev. “You think he’s talking to that guy, what’s his name, Ivan? About me and you?”

Dev shakes his head. “It’s family business. Stays in the family. I just wish we had time to talk with him.”

“We’ll have time to talk over dinner tonight. No movie this time.” I shield my eyes from the sun. “We’ll have to lay it out for him, that we’re gonna be together.”

He bites his lip. “Do we have to say it like that?”

“And when I say ‘we,’ I mean you.” I grin at his frown. “They won’t take it coming from just me.”

He sighs. “What do I say?”

I turn the question over. “Don’t be confrontational. Just say you’re really glad you were able to visit and you hope we can come back.”

“We.” He gets it. He smiles.

We get back to the house, where his mother is bustling around in the kitchen. I ask if I can help, and she says, “No,” then adds, a moment later, “thank you.”

Her tail’s wrapped tightly back around her legs, and she’s moving very quickly and intently. I don’t know if this is how she always gets when she’s preparing dinner, or if there’s something wrong I don’t know about. So I wander back to the living room, where Dev and I turn on ESPN and check out the sports scores. The baseball playoffs are on, and Chevali’s team is playing. We watch for a bit, and when a big wolf comes up to bat, Dev says, “He came around the locker room last year. He’s a prick.”

“I didn’t know baseball players talked to football players.” I’m aware that they do, of course, the two worlds just feel so independent of each other that I’m a little surprised every time I hear of it.

“He was just looking for free tickets.” Dev shrugs.

I grin. “Wouldn’t talk to a poor backup cornerback?”

He makes a “pfft” noise. “Wouldn’t talk to anyone but Aston.”

“Maybe he’ll talk to you now.” We watch as the wolf takes a

huge hack and strikes out.

Dev flips his paw. “Who says I want to talk to him? He can’t even hit the ball.”

That gets me thinking again about other gay athletes out there. I haven’t checked Dev’s e-mail in a couple days, but so far the one from the kid in high school is the only contact he’s gotten. There have to be others out there, there just have to. I’m watching the wolf walk back to the dugout and wondering if he’s gay, and it occurs to me that if he were, and wanted to keep it secret, the last thing he’d do is get in touch with Dev. Anyone spending time talking to him now is going to have questions raised about them.

I’m a little sad at that. And it doesn’t help when at a break in the action, a promo comes on for “Gay Athletes: What’s Next.”

Dev reaches out and turns the TV off. “Don’t you want to see what’s in your future?” I say.

He rests a large paw on my knee. “Dad’s home,” he says.

I hadn’t picked out the noise of the truck engine over the other cars on the street, but Dev knows it. He gets up and walks to the door, which opens right before he gets there.

His father looks surprised to see him, but changes the surprise into an ears-up smile, though his wide cheek ruffs don’t lift. Dev says hi, his dad says hi, and I stand and say hello as well.

He gives me a look that makes me think he’s been talking about me all day at work, and his auto shop friends have been giving him a hard time about his faggoty son’s faggot boyfriend. He nods curtly and goes into his den.

Dev gives me a quick look and then walks after him. I plop back down on the couch, realizing I’d been hoping his father would come home interested in talking, or at least a bit less standoffish. Fuck him, seriously. If he’s not going to make an effort, then the best thing is that we just get out of here in the morning, get back to Hilltown and catch our flight to Port City.

But that thought leaves a nasty feeling in my stomach, because Dev is so wrapped up in this family that if things don’t end well,

he's going to bomb the interview. And while I wouldn't be crushed if I never come back here, he would be.

So I get up, brush fox fur from the couch, and walk back to the kitchen. "Smells terrific," I say to Dev's mother.

"Thank you." She starts chopping some vegetables, with quick, sharp strokes.

"Mikhail's home," I say, for lack of anything else to say.

She nods. I lean against the door, resisting the impulse to just go watch TV in the living room. Have to keep trying. "I can chop, if you need some help."

"I'm fine," she says, still not looking at me. Weird. Earlier today, at the Bakers, she was fine. Is it her husband being home?

"Please, let me help," I say, and that stops her chopping.

She sets down the knife and indicates the cucumbers. "Wash your paws," she says, and as I walk over to the sink, she says, "Thank you."

"Thank you for taking me to the Bakers," I say, running my paws under the water. I dry them on a towel. "They're nice people." She still doesn't say anything. I push again, trying to get her to talk about Dev. "They said they used to watch Devlin and Gregory?"

"When they were small." Her distant tone grows slightly warmer. "Mikhail and I have known them for years."

I find a knife and turn it over, looking at the edge. "Do you think I have any chance of getting Mikhail to shake my paw before we go?"

"He believes what he believes," she says.

At least we're talking now. "I know," I say, "but I was hoping that getting to see us together, and meeting me, would maybe..." I chop some cucumber, thinking of how to put it. "Get him to admit an exception."

She checks the oven, then goes to the cupboard and starts taking out spices. "Devlin was a good cub, growing up."

"He still is," I say. "Really caring, really just a wonderful guy."

“He used to be respectful.”

I really have no idea where she’s going with this. “I don’t know anyone more sensitive to other people.”

“He’s always been sensitive,” she says. “I don’t know if I even know him now.”

That’s a bit startling. “What—why? Because he’s—” My tongue trips over the word “gay.” I don’t know what might be a red flag word with her. “With me?”

She measures out spices, quietly. I try another tack. “What were his girlfriends like? In high school, I mean. He told me you made one of them cry.”

I can smell the spices as she mixes them in the bowl. It looks like she’s smiling. “She insulted my dinner. She said it was ‘interesting.’ I told her that interesting would not be so bad for someone as plain as she was.”

I raise an eyebrow, even though she can’t see it. “You don’t seem like someone who would say something like that.”

“Oh, she had been very prim all night. She thought she was better than we were. I knew she was no good for Devlin.”

I take a breath. “Do you think I am?”

She doesn’t respond to that right away, but this time, I don’t fill the silence. Finally, she says, “I don’t know Devlin any more.”

It’s possible that Dev really has changed that much, that he and his parents have grown apart. I know that situation all too well. But I don’t really believe it. Hurt like this only comes when there are real feelings. If they’d grown apart, everything would feel more stale, more calcified.

It’s not like identifying as gay has completely transformed Dev’s personality. He’s matured, but that has nothing to do with being gay. Perhaps, I may modestly say, it does have something to do with it indirectly, as it brought my influence to bear on him. Then I think about sneaking around his parents’ hallway naked and I decide that perhaps I’m not as mature as all that.

“He’s not that different.” I finish the cucumbers and look

around for something else. “Do these carrots get chopped too?”

“Yes.” It’s very quiet where she is. I glance back at her and she’s not moving, just staring down at the counter.

“I’ve known him for almost four years,” I say. “Since junior year of college.”

“Gregory comes home once a month,” she says. “Even the month he got married.”

Mama’s boy, I think. “He has a different life. Where’s his practice?”

“Just outside Gateway. He tried to open something here in town, but there just wasn’t the business there is in the big city. He has a lovely little house out there, too. Has Devlin shown you pictures?”

“No.” I set to chopping carrots.

“It’s a two-story house, fifty years old. It’s so pretty. They have a lovely neighborhood, too. Alexi is so happy there.”

I try to remember whether Alexi is Dev’s sister-in-law or nephew. Nephew, I think. “Are there good schools there?” I ask, which should be appropriate no matter which it is.

“Gregory made sure of that. Alexi will be starting at the highest-rated school in the state next year. They already got his application approved. Gregory did some work for one of the administrators.”

She goes on while I finish chopping the vegetables. They go into a steamer, and then the conversation stalls again. She checks the oven and goes to the cupboard to get place settings. “Can I help?” I ask again.

She keeps her back to me. Her tail, which had been waving freely, is curled around her legs again. “Would you go tell Devlin and Mikhail that dinner will be ready in five minutes?”

“Sure.”

My own tail is drooping as I head to the closed door of the den. Not a lot, just a little. I hesitate before knocking at the door, perking one ear to listen in. But they’re not talking about me;

they're talking about football, about the Millenport game, father and son sharing that moment. And Dev sounds happy. He sounds proud. I raise my fist, knowing that my re-entry into the room will mute that bond, that happiness. I hear his father say, "You're strong, you're tough. Better than that Bixon," his voice rough, and Dev's half-hearted protest.

Bixon is Gateway's running back, the wolverine Dev will be going up against in a week and a half. He's fast enough to get around Pike easily, which means when they run to the weak side, he'll be Dev's responsibility. I hope Dev can stay out of the way of his claws.

Dev might be better than him. He might not; it's close. But it's good to hear his father tell him he is. I raise my paw and knock.

Of course, the mood chills, and stays chilly all the way to the dinner table. The roast beef is good, tender and juicy. I haven't had this much red meat in the past year. There's not much talk. I discard the subject of Dev's Today Show interview, or anything else that relates to his recent coming-out. Finally, in something like desperation, I ask about Gregory and how his practice is going.

Dev gives me a look, but it starts his mother talking, and even his father chimes in, though not to me. His mother doesn't really talk with an accent, but every so often I catch it in his father's voice, when he's talking fast or loud. When I hear it, I can't help it; I expect him to say, "*Bozhe moi!*" like an old Bond villain. I bite my lip so I don't smile when this happens, and I just focus on the spiced veggies, which are better than last night's.

It's Dev who turns the conversation back to football. In the middle of his mother talking about the case Gregory won before the last one he won, Dev abruptly says, "You know, the Firebirds haven't been four and two in over fifteen years."

"I remember that team," his father says into the silence. "Went nine and seven. Lost in the playoffs to Gateway."

I don't remember that team, or that year. Probably it was a year or two before my dad started me watching football. But we come

back to this year, talking about the players who are doing well, and when I see an opening, I toss in, “There’s only four or five weak-side linebackers playing better than Dev right now.”

Dev’s father looks up from his second helping of meat, first at me, then at his son. He nods, slowly. “Not so many good plays this last game,” he says.

I rattle off three plays Dev made that saved big gains and possibly scores. “He just makes them look easy.”

His father doesn’t say anything. After a moment, Dev mumbles, “The boars didn’t block very well.”

The conversation falls into silence. We go back to cleaning off our plates, most of us done eating.

When his plate is clear, Mikhail looks between the two of us again. “Fox,” he says, pointing to me and standing, “come walk outside. Duscha, clear the table. Devlin, help her.”

Dev’s mother half-rises from her chair. “Mikhail,” she says, with, it seems to me, a note of warning.

Mikhail looks back at her. She doesn’t give ground or say anything further. I’m not sure if I should stand up or not, but I follow Dev’s lead and stay seated. The silence is just starting to make me want to say something when Dev’s father just hmphs and says, “Do not worry.”

Dev looks at me as we both stand. I give him an encouraging smile, trying to echo the same words to him as I brush my chair off and follow his father out to the door. Despite my attempted assurance to Dev, my fur’s prickling and I’m braced for the worst.

Mikhail walks down the steps and stops there. As I descend the lowest one, he glances toward a large maple in the neighbor’s yard overhanging the sidewalk, a black patch in the dim evening light. The nearest streetlight is two houses down in the other direction. We’re partly lit by the light from the house, but there’s a thick cloud cover and bushes around the yard, and the prickling in my fur isn’t helped by the numerous and deep shadows in and around them. I catch a few scents of neighborhood residents, but I don’t

know this area, don't know who belongs and who doesn't, don't know if the heavily masculine scents are just midwestern testosterone, like in some areas back home.

Dev's father just folds his arms and waits for me. I consider for a moment walking back up two stairs, so I can look down on him the way he's looking down on me. Of course, that would be admitting that it bothers me. So I stay where I am, looking up at him, trying not to think about how his broad shoulders and huge paws remind me of Dev. It's easy to see where Dev gets his physique from. But he carries himself taller, beyond the two inches or so he has on his father. His father's shoulders bow forward, just a bit, his ears marked with old scars that I can still see, even in the half-light from the house.

He exhales. I can see his breath in the moist, cool air. "I want you to listen good," he says. He doesn't leave me space to respond, but I incline my head, ears pointed politely toward him anyway. "I have nothing against you personally. I have a good friend who's a fox. I know people who are…"

"Is this where you tell me to stay away from Dev?" I jump on the pause, keeping him from getting his speech out. "If so, we can skip that whole part and get to the end, where you respect me for standing up for myself."

His brow lowers. "I did not say I respect you."

"I respect you." It's not even a lie. Much.

That surprises him, but he shakes it off. "You will stop seeing Devlin."

"No, actually, I don't think I will." I remind myself not to get up on tiptoe. But I do fold my arms, mimicking his pose, staring back as intensely as he is.

"His life is hard enough, with football. You are making it harder for him."

"From where I stand," I say, "I'm making it easier for him. The only one making it harder is the one who won't accept his boyfriend into the family."

I want him to flinch when I say 'boyfriend,' but he doesn't. "There is no place for you in this family," he says.

"Then there's no place for Dev here," I say.

"I agree."

That one catches me off guard, but I stay calm. He's searching my muzzle for a reaction. "Dev still loves you," I say quietly. A shadow moves past the window looking out onto the porch. The living room, I think. But it doesn't stay there.

"And we love him. But if he brings shame on this family with his love of money, of attention, we will cast him out rather than encourage him to continue."

"Cast him out?" I can't help it; I raise my voice.

He doesn't say, "*Da.*" He just nods. "It would hurt us to do it."

"It would hurt him," I say.

He nods. "So you understand."

"But you'd be the ones hurting him. He won't forgive you."

"Perhaps not." His eyes look steadily down at me. "But he will blame you."

Of course he won't, I say, but of course, he will. Not consciously, but he'll always think of me as the reason his parents won't talk to him. He'll hate them openly and me secretly. I glance back at the warm light of the house, empty of shadows now, and then back to Mikhail's cold eyes. "You don't know your son very well," I say, as smugly as I can manage. I don't know what I'm trying to do. Provoke him into a fight? Get him so mad he loses control? The outcome's not likely to be good for me, either way. My 'fight or flight' response is dialed pretty much all the way to 'flight' at this point, but I stand still. I think of Dev, up there in that press conference. If he can stand up for himself there, I can stand up for myself here.

There's a rustling over by the maple tree, but I don't think any passer-by is going to poke his muzzle up the path and say, "hey, what's going on here?" Dev's father's eyes flick in that direction before returning to me. "We know him well enough. Better than

you."

"So you'd turn him against you just to also try to turn him against me." It feels like the temperature out here has dropped several degrees. "What will the neighbors think?"

He snorts. "Good neighbors respect family privacy."

"Translation: why tell them, when you think he'll choose you over me."

"We are family." I think he's trying to out-smug me. "He will always come back to us."

"You're a sick bastard."

"It would hurt us more to see him be," and here he leans down toward me, "a public spectacle of a faggot."

"They have nicer words for us now," I say. "Queer. Gay. Person."

He shrugs. "I did not enjoy being called 'Sibey' as a cub. Other cubs used that name, I made them stop. You want me to stop, you can make me stop."

"I'm not going to fight you," I say. In staring at his eyes, I managed to briefly forget about his huge biceps, his barrel of a chest. All the same power as in Dev, but arrayed against me now. I try not to let my ears or tail betray my accelerated heartbeat.

He sneers. "Of course you are not."

"It's not because I'm gay," I say. "It's because you outweigh me by about a hundred pounds."

"I have fought three at once." He holds up a paw, velvety soft. "No claws. No teeth."

"Even more reason I won't fight you." I will not take a step back. I will not take a step back. "So is this conversation over yet?"

His breath smells of pot roast and the same testosterone that infuses the air. He pokes my chest. "This is why I know Devlin is no faggot. He is not afraid to fight."

That poke was harder, the words louder. I'm getting the "*bozhe moi*" vibe off him again. "I know you know him," I say, "but I have firsthand knowledge to the contrary."

“Hmph.” He snorts another meat-infused breath into my face. “Doesn’t matter where a boy sticks his dick,” he says.

“Oh, is that so?” My ears fold back. I do want to hit him, to wipe that smug goddamn smile off his muzzle, to erase the contempt for the effeminate fox he thinks he sees. But I haven’t been in a fight outside my aikido dojo in, well, ever. Aikido’s no good for starting a fight, anyway. I only know one good way to do that. “What makes you so sure he’s the one doing the sticking?”

He stares for a moment and then laughs, a clipped, humorless laugh. “Now this conversation is over.” He half-pushes, half-punches my shoulder. “You’ll stay away from him, or you will be responsible for tearing him from his family.”

He turns away from me to go back up the stairs, but before he can take even one step, I say, “You think that’ll stop him from being a khooe-sos?”

There’s an instant where I wonder if I pronounced it correctly. I see the bunch of his shoulders. A moment later, there’s no doubt. He doesn’t move quite as fast as Dev, so his first swipe at my muzzle misses as I duck it. I’m so focused on that that I miss his return swipe, allowing him to grab my left wrist awkwardly, his thumb hooked around mine as if we’re exchanging some kind of secret gang sign. With that leverage, he grabs again at my muzzle—grabbing, I note, not just hitting—but I manage to stay away, trying to free my paw.

“You…will…not…use…that…word.” Grunts punctuate each swipe. I fend him off with my free paw, looking desperately at the windows, but they remain blank and empty.

I decide not to say, “Make me stop,” because, well, he’s already doing that. I twist my wrists in some basic aikido escapes, but he just tightens his grip. Most of the escapes I know get me out of wrist holds, not interlocking paws. “You’ll have to accept it,” I growl over the pain in my thumb. “Or you’ll lose him.”

“I will not lose him!” He almost shouts this, his face a snarl of frustration. He yanks on my paw, twisting to try to throw me off

balance, and his fist clenches around my awkwardly bent thumb at the same time.

I hear the pop before I feel it, a dull crack in the still air. Then I

feel it as a movement my paw shouldn't be able to make, and he feels it too, his paw releasing mine quickly. My thumb is hanging awkwardly away from my paw, at an impossible angle. I have a moment to think, clearly, *this is going to hurt*. And then it does.

Oh, shit. Pain floods my paw, radiating in sharp waves from my thumb. I clutch it to my chest, dimly aware of more rustling and footsteps approaching. Two dim shapes swim into view. "Mickey?" one says.

"Go away," Dev's father says harshly. "Get out of here."

I'm not sure if I made any noise when my thumb broke. I can hear myself panting harshly, but they're all standing around not paying attention and my thumb hurts like a son of a bitch, so I start up the stairs to the house.

A heavy paw grabs my shoulder from behind. I twist away from it. "Don't touch me," I snarl, protecting my injured paw.

"Listen," Dev's father says. His tail lashes behind him, his voice an intense whisper, shielded from the other figures. "You fell on your paw and it broke. You say otherwise and we disown Devlin."

It takes me a second to process what he just said. I look down at him from two steps up, his angry muzzle betraying traces of worry. "Christ, you're an asshole," I say, and I go into the house.

7

Game Changer (Dev)

I'm glad Dad took Lee outside. Hopefully he was just going to have one of his talks, laying down the boundaries of what's right and what's not. I wonder briefly if he could've seen Lee walking around naked, or if maybe somehow he saw us fooling around. The guilt from this morning stabs me briefly, but I try to summon Lee's cool about it. It was no big deal, I tell myself. They didn't know, it shouldn't bother them.

But Mom is acting weird around me. If I did something wrong, she'd just scold me. If Lee did something wrong...what? This isn't like a high school girlfriend wearing a revealing dress. I make some comment like, "I hope Dad and Lee are getting along," and she doesn't respond, so maybe it was something Lee did. But I don't know how to get her to tell me what.

So I just help her clear the table and load the dishwasher. I pass by the window to see what Dad and Lee are doing. They're just talking.

I turn and see Mom standing by the TV in the living room, staring at nothing in particular. I walk over to her. "I'm glad you like Lee, at least."

Her ears flick quickly back. "Would you like something to drink? I think your father has some beer."

"Sure." I walk to the bar with her and take the bottle she gives me. I pop the cap and take a swig.

She sits on the couch, paws between her knees. I take another drink and lean against the bar. I'm just reaching for the remote to turn on the TV when she says, "Devlin, are you happy?"

I stop in the stillness of the living room. I don't want to take the question lightly. This is the first real private time we've had, Mom and me. So: am I happy? Right now...not exactly. I'm drinking mediocre beer, worrying about what's bothering her, worrying about what's going on with Lee and Dad, worrying about my interview tomorrow. But I realize that she doesn't mean that. So I answer the question I think she's really asking. "Yeah, I am."

She takes a breath. "Then that's what matters," she says, and goes to the bar to pour herself a drink. When she turns to me, she's already lowering the glass from her lips, and a third of it is gone. "But when you are in our house, you'll respect our house. All right?"

My tail curls around my legs. She knows, somehow, she knows. She woke up and saw Lee, or she heard me moan. "I do respect your house," I mumble.

"You're grown up, so I'm asking you, not telling you. I think we raised you to have that much courtesy."

"Mom..."

"I didn't say anything to your father." She downs the rest of the glass and turns to look out of the living room window. It's fully dark outside. "I hope..."

I wait for her to finish, then say, "Do you know what Dad's talking to Lee about?"

She shakes her head, quickly. We both wait and listen for a moment, and then she sighs. "Tell me about the football game. Did you have to use your claws?"

"You just get worked up," I say. "All the guys do. And he went after Fisher."

"Two wrongs," she starts.

"Mom, it happens all the time. It's not like high school."

"I watch with your father," she says. "I don't see many fights."

“Fisher’s like my older brother,” I say. “I have to stick up for him. Sometimes not fighting is worse than fighting.”

She frowns. “You sound like your father.”

I don’t know what to say to that. But it’s just then that the front door flies open and Lee strides in. The first thing I look at are his ears, flat against his head. Then I notice his tail curled under his legs. He ignores my mother and comes right up to me. “I need you to drive me to the hospital.”

“What?” Only then do I see that he’s cradling his left paw against his chest, his teeth gritted. “What happened?”

The front door closes. Dad stalks into the living room, tail lashing. “He fell,” he growls roughly.

Lee half-turns. The only time I’ve seen that kind of look in his eyes before, it was when we were talking about the teammates of mine who beat up his friend Brian. He’s working himself up to say what he needs to. Dad starts to talk again, but Lee interrupts him, roughly. “Your father…broke my thumb,” he says.

Dad’s tail is whipping from side to side, his ears flat too, the kind of look that makes me cringe with the memory of a hundred cracks across my backside, a thousand cuffs to the head. But Lee doesn’t even flinch. He looks back at me as Dad says, “He’s lying. He fell.”

Mom looks between me and Dad. Dad and Lee are both staring at me. Lee’s panting harshly, with pain or worry or something. The fur around his eyes is damp, but he’s not crying. The tears are involuntary, pushed out by the pain. His teeth are gritted as he waits for me. Over his shoulder, Dad glowers. His fists are still clenched.

I turn from my father back to Lee, meet his blue eyes, and take a breath. “C’mon,” I tell him. “Let’s go to the hospital.”

It takes all my courage to just walk past Dad, with him staring me down. But Lee needs me. I keep that in mind. Dad watches me, doesn’t say anything until we’re almost at the door. Then he growls, “You don’t *believe* him, do you?”

I turn and see his claws out. But I also see the wide eyes, the desperation behind the anger. “I’ll be back to get our things,” I say. “Then if you feel like telling me why you broke his paw, I’ll listen.”

He takes another step forward. “Devlin, if you walk out that door…”

“What?” I say. “‘Don’t come back’?”

He’s breathing hard. Mom walks up and lays a paw on his arm. “Mikhail,” she says softly.

Dad yanks his arm away and gets up in my face. “You’re choosing that fox over us!”

Lee is very still. Only his ears, cupped back and bolt upright now, betray his tension.

“My boyfriend,” I say deliberately, “needs to go to the hospital. You always taught me to take care of the people you love. That’s what I’m doing.”

“What about us?” My father almost yells it.

“You want to come along?”

They stare at me. Then Mom says, “I’ll pack your things for you.”

“Duscha—” I don’t hear the rest of whatever Dad says. Lee opens the door with his good paw, and I follow him out.

He walks stiffly down the path, past a tiger with a gut and a black bear, who watch him without moving. The tiger’s muzzle, even in the yellow streetlight, shows grey. “Devlin?” he says as I approach, and I recognize Ivan, the head mechanic at Dad’s auto shop.

I stop. Lee crosses the street, his steps still hurried. I can’t think of anything intelligent to say. “Ivan? What’s up?”

“Your dad,” he says, and then looks at Lee and stops. The bear I don’t recognize, but he’s wearing overalls with the shop logo on them, so it’s not hard to figure out the association.

“What, is it poker night?”

“We just thought…” Ivan looks at the bear, then back at me. “He said you were home. We just wanted to say hi. Is he okay?”

I don't know if they mean Dad or Lee. The windows of the house are empty, but Lee's looking my way from the passenger seat of his car. "We're fine," I say. "I gotta go."

Only in the car, as I wedge myself behind the wheel and adjust the seat for my bulk, does Lee unwind, letting his shoulders slump back against the seat and his eyes close. He lists toward me so that I think he's passed out, until he nuzzles my shoulder and says, "Thank you."

"For what?"

One eye cracks open. "Believing me."

"Did you lie?" I'm a little rougher than I should be, for a question I'm only asking to hear him say 'no.' It's just him and me, on the road now, heading for the hospital my parents rushed me to when I fell out of the maple tree in the front yard and broke my arm.

Lee sits back up. "No."

I can see that maple tree in the rear view mirror, Ivan and the bear standing beneath it watching us go. I can't see the front of the house, until we turn the corner and I get a brief glimpse of two bright, empty windows, like a pair of golden eyes behind us. "I won't ask what happened," I say. "Not now. The hospital's only like ten minutes away. You okay?"

I know before he opens his muzzle that he's going to make a smart remark about his thumb, but he shuts it quickly and then just says, "Yeah, I'll live."

"'Cause you know," I say, "guys on the team break their thumb like every other game."

"Well, shoot me full of painkillers and give me a million bucks and you can break my thumb whenever you want." He resettles himself in the seat and winces. His breathing's harsher than usual, but I don't see any gleam of tears in his eyes when I glance over. "It's kinda numb at this point," and then he grits his teeth as we rattle over a pothole, "except when it gets jarred."

"Sorry."

“What do your parents pay taxes for, anyway?” The joke falls flat. He holds his paw to his chest and doesn’t speak again until we pull into the hospital parking lot.

The emergency room smells like our training room. Lee refuses my help filling out the form, muttering, “I can still write.” There’s nobody else in the room, so I smile at the nurse, an elderly jaguar. She smiles back, and comes around from behind the desk to take the form when Lee’s done rather than making us come back to her.

“You’re that football player,” she says to me as she picks it up. Her voice is sharp, but friendly, slightly Latin-accented.

Lee’s ears flick. I just nod. “I play for the Firebirds,” I say.

“Mickey Miski’s boy, right? I remember when you won the game against the Hilltoppers.” Her smile is bright. “Nobody has run that fast since.”

“Thank you.” I beam at her. Lee relaxes a bit.

“They haven’t won that game since you left, you know.”

I smile. “I’m sure it’s just a matter of time.”

She glances over the form and says to Lee, “You can come on back. The nurse is ready.”

He looks at me as I get up, and she sees it. “You want to come back with him?” She says it “weeth.”

I get up. “Yeah.”

So we go back to the exam room, where a young female raccoon asks Lee how he’s doing. She takes his paw during his noncommittal answer and gently examines the thumb. I hadn’t had a chance to see it clearly yet.

The sight makes me wince. His thumb is hanging unnaturally away from the rest of his paw, disturbingly loose. He’s holding it very stiffly, and trying not to look at it. “We’ll get this into x-ray right away,” she says. “How did it happen?”

He could say anything. I didn’t coach him or ask him to lie. He doesn’t look at me. “I, uh, fell,” he said. “Tripped…landed on the paw.” He gives her a sheepish smile.

She writes that down. “Have you been drinking tonight?”

He shakes his head. “A little wine with dinner, but just a glass.”

“Okay, that’s not a problem.” She makes some notes while I watch Lee, his muzzle still turned away from me. He could’ve said “it happened in a fight,” or he could’ve been completely honest. I clench my fists and then force myself to open them and place them on my knees, breathing. I want to know what happened between him and my father.

I know my father would try to intimidate Lee physically. We grew up with spankings, cuffings, roughhousing, physical play. But I didn’t think he’d actually hurt Lee. He was rough with us boys, but only once got into a fight that he got in trouble for. Had to file a police report and everything. This time, though, Lee didn’t give him up. That’s something Dad always used to say to me, that family trouble stays in the family, and for Lee to respect that, that means a lot to me. It means he’s not giving up on being part of the family. Or at least, not giving up on me being part of the family.

He’s hunched over on the exam room bed, the tremors in his ears and toes the only sign of pain I can see as the nurse manipulates his paw, and I think about how brave he is to have stood up to my father. And I think about what it means that I never, even for a moment, considered the possibility that he might be the one lying.

The nurse takes him away to get x-rayed, and tells me that I can wait here for him. I sit in the extra chair in the empty exam room, and my thoughts turn to the chance that I might never be able to bring him home. That I might have to spend Christmas Eve with my parents and Christmas Day with him (if it’s not a Saturday or Sunday, when we have to practice or play). Weddings, my birthdays, family vacations—football keeps me away from some of them now, too many. But I’d give up football sooner than I’d give up my family. My heart pounds no matter how much I tell myself I don’t have to make that choice.

I remember again what Lee told the nurse. That helps; I relax in the chair, my tail curling and uncurling rhythmically as I clasp my

paws over my chest. I know it'll take time, but when I tell Dad about this, it'll help, I know it will.

When Lee gets back from the x-ray, the nurse tells him the doctor will be with him in a minute, and leaves us alone. I look up; he grins down from the exam table.

"She gave me a pill," he says, holding up his paw. The thumb looks as bad as ever, except it's back in its proper place.

"Just one?"

He thinks. "There might have been three."

I remember Fisher on the table in the training room. Lee's starting to get that same dazed look. "So?" I gesture at his thumb.

"It doesn't hurt as much. She popped it back in the socket." He smiles lopsidedly, and his tail, hanging off the back of the table, wags lazily. "I think that hurt."

"They gonna fix it up? Firebirds'd have that wrapped and set by now."

"Yeah, well, this is middle America. We don't all have our own private health care."

"Hey," I say, reaching over to put a paw on his knee. "Thanks."

He blinks at me. "F'what?"

The door opens, and I jerk my paw back. A white-coated pine marten wanders in, stifling a yawn. "Mister Farrel?" He raises his eyebrows at me.

Lee raises his paw. The doctor holds up an x-ray and nods. "That's a match, all right. Dislocated. You win a brand new cast." The raccoon nurse comes back in after him. "Sir, if you wouldn't mind waiting in the waiting room," the marten says to me. "It'll only be about fifteen minutes."

"Sure." I stand, head to the door, and look back. Lee and I are used to saying things with looks, even when drunk or on painkillers. He flicks his ears, and gives me a smile that lets me know he was exaggerating his dopiness, and I grin back and give him an exaggerated thumbs-up, which makes him grimace. I'm still chuckling at his pained expression as I plop down in the waiting

room.

It's empty except for me and the jaguar nurse. I grab a magazine, but I can't focus on it. So I toss it back on the table and just stare at the hideous paintings on the wall, thinking again about family and about Lee.

"Excuse me." The nurse has come out from behind the desk and is leaning over me. I read her nametag: Duena.

"Hi." I smile.

She looks toward the door back to the hospital. "That fox, Mister Farrel..."

I incline my head, feeling a little chill settle into my chest. She goes on. "You know, little Mike Harnby is, um..." She chews her lip. "Not so little now. He has a friend, a possum. I saw them at the Lakeside, with Mike's parents."

"I'd heard," I say.

She puts a paw on my shoulder. "It was a brave thing you did. It is hard to be yourself. But it is easier if there is someone who understands who you are, *si?*"

"I guess." Her eyes are old and kind. I find myself not as wary of her knowing about Lee as I'd thought I would when she first made her remark.

"I will not tell anyone," she says.

It takes me a moment to realize that she's promising not to tell anyone if I confirm it, not that she's already figured it out. I nod. This shouldn't be as hard as my press conference, but it feels like there's cameras on me. "Yeah. He's my...friend."

Her smile gets huge, and her eyes well up a bit. "We will take good care of him. Do not worry about him."

"Thanks," I say awkwardly, and she keeps standing there as though expecting me to say something else. So I say, "You're very kind," and that satisfies her.

Lee comes out about twenty minutes later, paw held awkwardly in front of him. Because I'm looking mostly at the white plaster cast against his black fur, I don't see right away that he's got a

small bottle in his other paw. The raccoon nurse follows him out.

"Did you pick white?" I ask, eyes on the cast. It looks huge, engulfing his whole paw. Only his fingers show. "Or didn't they have black?"

He tries to focus on me. "Picked white," he says. "Their black… didn't match."

The nurse comes up to his side and smiles. "He was very fussy about the color," she tells me. "You'll be taking him home?"

I hesitate. But she doesn't care what 'home' is, she just wants to know if I'm taking care of him. "Yeah."

"Okay," she says. "The cast should be completely dry in ten minutes. We gave him instructions to take care of it. He's had plenty of medication for tonight, and tomorrow he can start taking the pills, only as needed. Instructions are on the bottle. You'll be okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "Thanks."

She smiles and walks back to the back. Lee watches her go, but he's kind of staring, looking dazed. I stand up and hug him, and despite the pain medication, he stiffens, eyes on the jaguar nurse behind the desk.

"It's okay," I say softly next to one of his ears, which flicks. "She's cool."

His muzzle shifts so he's not looking at the jaguar nurse any more. "Mmkay. Where we goin'?"

"Gotta go home and get our stuff," I say, leaving out the part where I hope we'll be able to stay at the house. I'm not that sure about it, but I know how Lee's going to react if I tell him.

When we pull up outside the house and I ask if he minds waiting in the car, he just shakes his head minutely and leans back into the car seat. So I leave the car running and the heat on, and I flick on the radio.

The house is quiet. I knock, and then open the door without waiting for an answer. Once inside, I can see the flicker of light from the TV in the living room. Our bags are sitting in the hallway,

and the kitchen is dark.

"Mom?" I call.

"Your bags are there," she says.

I stop in the doorway of the living room. She's sitting on the couch. "His paw's in a cast," I say.

She looks at me, and I'm a little surprised at the mix of anger and regret in her eyes. "Do you want us to pay for it?"

Is she resentful? Is she offering? I can't tell. "No, his insurance covered it, and I make plenty of money." More than Dad, I almost say. "I just wondered, I mean, it's really late. Can we just stay here? We'll leave first thing in the morning."

She sighs. "I don't think—"

The den door bangs open. My father stands there, glaring at me. "Absolutely not."

I flinch, and then hate myself for it. My fists clench, and claws extend. "You're kicking me out?" They're both silent. "What happened to family? What happened to 'love you no matter what'?"

"This isn't about you," Dad says. "It's about him."

"He didn't give you up." I glare, to hide the twisting in my stomach at Dad's growl when he talks about Lee. "At the hospital. He lied for you, after what you did."

"So you still believe him." Dad folds his arms.

I growl, "He's part of my life."

Mom isn't looking at either of us, but she doesn't look like she's looking at the TV, either. Dad is staring right at me, challenging. "He is not part of ours."

I meet his stare across the length of the room. "So you're kicking me out."

"No," Mom says quietly. Dad sets his jaw, his tail lashing.

"Fine," I say. I turn around and stomp into the foyer, grabbing our bags. I hesitate there, waiting for one of them to call me back in. Of course they won't let me just go out and stay in a hotel, right?

Dad yells after me, “Don’t even think of trying to bring him back here.”

“Fuck you,” I mutter, but loudly enough that there’s a chance Mom might hear me. It makes me feel daring, rebellious enough to throw the door open and slam it shut behind me.

I throw the bags in the back seat and get in behind the wheel. For a minute, I just sit there, looking at the house, and then I slam my paws against the wheel so hard they sting. I do it again. Lee stirs and looks at me. “Don’t fuck up your paws,” he murmurs.

“Yeah.” I start the car and pull out.

His half-lidded eyes follow our progress down the street, around the corner. “Where we going?”

I’m just driving. I grip the wheel so tightly my fingers hurt. “I don’t know.”

Part III

8

Casting Call (Lee)

I wake up in a hotel bed, my thumb still throbbing, but not searing with pain. Dev isn't there, but his smell is in the bed. I open my eyes to a flood of bright light. A shape moves through it toward me.

"How you doing?"

I yawn. "Where are we?"

"The Lake Handerson Homeward Suites." He kneels on the bed, rolling me toward him. "You ready? We need to get going pretty soon to get to the Hillsdale Airport."

I nod. "I can skip the shower."

So we're in the car twenty minutes later, on our way back. Even though it's quiet, I'm starting to get a headache from the bright light. I veto the radio and just close my eyes.

I think it's safe to say that the visit could've gone better. But I can think of ways it could've gone worse. Like, Dev's parents could've actually disowned him in front of me. They could have poisoned me. Mikhail could have broken more than just my thumb.

Well, it wasn't broken, just dislocated. The doctor said, when looking at it, "it looks like someone did this on purpose." I just shrugged and he didn't say anything else. I don't feel like telling Dev this.

I can't see how I can make things up with Mikhail. And I think the fact that Dev stayed in the hotel room with me last night

probably didn't go over too well with them either. I haven't asked him yet. He's quiet and his tail is curled tightly under his seat. I try to gauge how bad it is from his scent and his posture, when I crack my eyes open to look. He's stressed, but not disconsolate; tense, but not desperate. So I'm guessing they haven't kicked him out of the house. I, on the other hand, am definitely not invited back to dinner.

But Dev's tension eases as the day goes on. When I ask him to stop at the Chicken Stand for lunch, he nods and even smiles. And when we get back in the car, after some small talk, that's when the questions start. I kinda hope maybe he'll be distracted by the Today Show, and catching the flight, and other stuff, but no such luck.

"So what happened?" He says it softly, but I don't have any trouble hearing it, even with the highway whizzing by.

"We had an argument. We both kind of lost our tempers. He grabbed my paw and twisted it."

"What did you say?"

"You don't want to know what he said?"

He chuckles. "I have a pretty good idea. But I want to know what you said that set him off."

I fidget in the seat. "You remember your airplane story?"

He whips around his head and stares at me, and then he just starts laughing. "You called him that?"

"Not exactly." I stare down at my lap. "I, uh, called you that."

His laughter dies down. "That's when he grabbed your paw."

"Yeah." It's all kind of hazy in my head now. "I think he was trying to take a swing at me, and I was holding him off..."

He sighs. "Did you have to provoke him?"

"Me?"

One of his fingers taps the wheel. "You could've just nodded and gone along with him."

"Come on," I say. "You know me."

"Yeah." He isn't laughing at all, now. "You make things harder

for yourself. You mess with people because you can." I stay quiet. "Like that reporter guy."

"That's different. I wasn't just trying to mess with your dad. He told me to keep away from you."

"So what?" I can hear the rustle of his tail lashing, now. "You know how he is. Why can't you just let that go? We don't have to do what he says when we're not in his house."

"You weren't so worried about that the night before last."

He doesn't look at me. "Maybe that was a mistake."

Shows what I know. I thought it was pretty amazing. My own tail curls up behind me. "So you just want to be my boyfriend when it's convenient?"

Now he shoots me a look, a dangerous one. "You know better than that."

"I thought I did. I guess maybe Dev At Home is different from Dev everywhere else."

"Maybe he is." He glares ahead at the road. We're coming up on a slow car; he cuts off someone in the passing lane to get around them.

"Maybe Dev the Driver needs to calm the fuck down," I say.

"If you could just not have to be right every single fucking time, maybe you'd be able to drive yourself," he says. "But I guess you'll just have to live with Dev the Driver."

"I'd like to," I say tightly. "Live, that is."

He swings back into the slow lane and drops to fifty-five. "That work for you?"

The car we just passed is coming up on our bumper. I sigh and close my eyes again.

The argument doesn't simmer over for the rest of the trip, staying below the surface all the way back to Hilltown. He does help me out of the car at my apartment, but I insist on getting my own bag. I can carry one over my shoulder and the computer bag in my paw. My dislocated thumb is throbbing, but I'm trying to ignore it. I can't take a pill for another hour, and we need to get

packed for the flight to Port City.

I let Dev unlock the door. He tosses both bags onto the bed, and as I start to unzip mine, he stares down at his. “Shit,” he says.

I look over. He reaches into his bag and picks up the bottle of lube.

Our eyes meet. “Please tell me you packed that.” I know he didn’t, though, just from his expression, before he even shakes his head.

“If you hadn’t…” He trails off.

“Well,” I say, trying to joke, “it’s not like it made things any worse.”

“Mom liked you,” he shoots back. “Until she found this.” He brandishes the bottle.

“She still likes me,” I say. “I had to slave away in the kitchen, but we were okay. Maybe she told your father, and that’s why—”

“She said she didn’t.” He drops the bottle on the bed. “I didn’t know what she was talking about. Christ.”

“Look,” I say. “We’re dating. We’re boyfriends. Boyfriends do stuff with each other.”

“They don’t have to do stuff all the time.” He starts throwing clothes out of his bag onto the bed.

I watch him for a minute, then empty my own bag, one-pawed. “Fine. So next time, stop me.”

He grabs the garment bag from the closet, the one with his nice suit. For a moment he just stands there and holds it. “It probably won’t matter,” he says, and lays the bag on the bed.

He wants me to ask him what he means, so I don’t. I try not to worry that Mikhail’s prediction is already coming true. We fight all the time anyway. This isn’t any different.

We pack with no more than small talk, “are you taking this?” and “will I need this?” Originally, I was supposed to drop him off at the airport, park the car, and take the shuttle over, but I can’t really drive now. So he drops me off and goes to park.

Standing in the chill autumn air, watching my car disappear

along the airport drive, the tension I felt from our argument fades. Dammit, I miss him. I pull out my phone to text him, but texting with my broken thumb is too painful. So I heft my shoulder bag and go inside to check in for my flight.

I had Dev buy our tickets on different airlines so we won't be seen traveling together. This also avoids the conflict of him sitting in first and me in coach on the same airplane. We leave within half an hour of each other and arrive within forty-five minutes.

I take the opportunity to call in to the office. I get my slate of games from Morty, give him the highlights from my spreadsheet, and promise I'll send it to him when I get to the hotel in Port City. He tells me a place to get terrific bagels, and I promise to bring him back a couple. With that obligation discharged, I can relax a little more on the flight.

That's the plan, but it doesn't really work. You never really notice how much you use your thumbs for things until it hurts you to do it. At least the marmot next to me, overweight through she is, clucked at my thumb and offered to help me with my seatbelt and stuff. I spend a lot of time holding the cast and wishing I could take another dose of pain pills. But I shouldn't while flying, even if I hadn't taken some just an hour ago. Instead I get to think thoughts about Dev, about how flying separately sucks when we're going to the same place, about his family and how glad I am that football screws up the big family holidays so it's not as obvious how I'm doing it too.

Because it certainly doesn't look like I'll be coming to Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas Mass in Lake Handerson anytime soon. And I know he sees that in our future, even if now it's a fainter hope than it was three days ago. Sitting in midsize coach class, squeezed between the marmot and an adolescent porcupine who doesn't even apologize every time he jabs me in the arm, it's hard not to feel down on myself. There's no pills for that ache.

It was obvious how Dev fit into the family dynamic: the dutiful son expected to bring honor to the family, in the shadow of his

father and older brother. He didn't seem particularly happy there; at least, not the kind of happy he is when he's with me, or playing football. But he felt comfortable in a way I'm not even sure he does with me, yet. He's been with them for twenty-four years, after all, and with me barely two and a half.

Dev could do better than me. He could at least find someone who'd be happy to be in his closet, like Salim has with Jeremy. Maybe he'd be better off living Salim's life, with a wife he can bring home to the family, and a boyfriend who wouldn't care that he was just a piece on the side.

His father's threat echoes in my head as I obsessively imagine Dev with a wife and cubs, with mechanical sex (as he described it to me, back in college), sitting around the table in his parents' house. I imagine myself lurking under the maple tree in the dark, waiting until he can slip out for a furtive blow job. Then he goes back inside, and I slink back to...to what?

I love Dev, and I'm pretty sure he loves me. I mean, it's been a few years now. If he wanted to dump me, he would have by now. But I can't get the question out of my head: is that enough?

It stays with me all the way to the landing in Port City, by which time my right arm has half a dozen little pricks in it from the bigger prick sitting next to me. We all give him a wide berth on the way out. Most porcupines are considerate enough to wear long sleeves in crowded situations, but what can you do when there's one guy who just doesn't care about the people around him?

He fits right in at the Port City airport, though. It's loud and full of smells and people, jostling and filling the air and just generally making it miserable for folks with sensitive noses who don't want to wear NeutraScent the whole time they're in the airport. They keep talking about upgrading the filtering system, but there's no canids on the Transit Authority. The signs say, 'improvements coming 2012—Port City is Airport City.' In the two years I've been flying, the only change I've seen in that sign is the year. It's a lot easier to promise change than to make it.

Happily, the guy in the taxi line gets me a Cleen-Fresh taxi without me having to ask. The one thing I'll say for Port City is that whatever you need, you can get it here. The Cleen-Fresh taxis use scent-maskers to keep the passenger area pretty fresh. And they're okay picking up foxes or even skunks, with no extra scent-removal fee.

On the way to the hotel, I get a text from Dev with the room number, so when I get there, I just head right for the elevators and walk down to the room. He's left it ajar, and when I walk in, he's lying back on the bed, napping. I close the door, drop my bag, and just watch him sleeping.

It'd kill me to leave him. But if I knew he was going to be happy, I could manage. I always hated those sappy stories where the one guy says all he cares about is that the other guy is happy. I always thought it was a load of romantic crap. And yet, here I am, thinking, yeah, if he'll be miserable missing his family, would I want to be the cause of that?

He opens his eyes. "How was your flight?"

"Prickly." I rub my right arm. "How was yours?"

He yawns. "They ran out of cookies."

"Hope you lodged a complaint." I stand near the bed, still looking down.

He cracks an eye up at me. "I won't bite you, doc."

I force a smile. "Aw. I'm not that sleepy, really. Was thinking about finding a place to eat."

"Order out?"

"Yeah."

He yawns again and closes his eyes. "Let's just do room service."

We stay pleasant through the rest of the night, but I can tell his family is still on his mind. It probably wasn't the best idea to agree to the TV spot right after the trip home. Although if the visit had gone well, it would've been great to be able to go on TV and tell them that his family supports him.

Knowing his family, though, how likely would that really have been? I can only hope that a night's sleep puts it out of his mind. He's got to be up at five to go down to the studio, and I can't go with him, obviously, so I coach him on some questions until he gets snappy, and then I tell him he'd better not be snappy tomorrow, and he says as long as I'm not the one asking him questions on the show, he'll be fine.

It's tense, but no more than we're used to, and we go to sleep in the same bed. Neither of us feels like taking our boxers off, but when I nudge up against his arm, he drapes it over me. Things feel okay.

I feel more in the mood to take my boxers off the next morning, but by the time I do, he's already opened the curtains and jumped right into the shower. I want to test whether things are as okay between us as I feel they are. So I lie naked on the bed, paws linked awkwardly behind my head, tail twitching between my legs, getting myself hard. My paw hurts, but not a lot, so I leave the painkillers on the bedside table and watch Dev come out of the shower.

He notices me right away. I don't show my relief when he just gives a little shake of his head and sets about pulling on his clothes. It doesn't matter that he doesn't say anything as he slips into his shirt and tucks it into his pants. He keeps looking at me in the mirror.

Watching him dress is pretty hot, not just because I always like watching his muscles under his short fur, but also because his suit looks really good, and he looks hot in it. Very fuckable. I curl my tail under my erection, showing it off against the white fur of my tail tip.

"Tryin' to distract me?" Dev looks sideways at me.

"Just giving you something to think about while they're talking to you." I reach down and put my uninjured paw on my sheath. "They're going to talk to you about being gay, remember? What if you forget what a naked fox looks like?"

He looks away and reaches for his tie. “They’re just going to ask me stupid stuff about the team and bigots in the league.”

He’s still tense. He’s keeping his tail pretty still, but there are a hundred little things I know about him that show me he’s nervous. “Come on,” I say. “This is just like a ballgame. In fact, fewer people watch the Today Show than watch a typical football game.”

“Really?” He still doesn’t look at me.

“Yeah.” I just made that up.

“I don’t have to talk during football games.”

“You talked during the press conference.” He’s having a little trouble with the tie. “Didn’t they teach you how to tie those in rookie orientation?”

Now he gives me a baleful look. “I’ll get it.”

“I don’t mind helping you with *your* knot, for once.”

That’s normally the kind of joke-slash-offer he’d respond to, but even if things are okay between us, he’s still nervous about the show. He unloops the tie and starts over again. On the third try, he gets it. Then he shrugs on his suit jacket and turns to me. “How do I look?”

“You look great.” I trail a finger up my sheath, not to tease him, but because I want to, because he does look great.

He walks over to the edge of the bed and leans over. “Wish me luck.”

We kiss. “Listen,” I say as he straightens. “Be careful, okay? I mean, really careful.”

“I know.”

“Seriously,” I say. “Think about what you’re gonna say. Even if it takes a couple seconds. People expect jocks to be slow.”

“I’m not slow.” He starts to walk away.

“I know,” I call after him. “The point is, you’re quick enough that you can take a half-second and people won’t think you’re slow.”

He doesn’t look back, just raises a paw. “Thanks.”

“Good luck,” I say, and then, as the door closes, “knock ’em

dead."

I've got two hours before the show comes on, and a warm sheath. For about fifteen minutes, I tell myself I should stay ready for him for when he comes back from the show, while my paw is telling me that if I'm fast, I'll have plenty of time to recover and be ready in four hours, or however long it is. By the time my mind finally gives in, I'm already hard and half-knotted. From there, it's a simple matter of closing my eyes and imagining Dev thrusting up inside me, and before long the tension of my knot is pounding with every heartbeat. Several gasping strokes later, I let out a nice long moan and come all over my stomach.

It's only then that I wonder if Dev put the privacy sign on the door. I lie back, letting my tongue loll out, taking the chance that ten more minutes won't bring the housekeeping staff.

When I wake up, the sun's hitting me right in the face. I rub my eyes and yawn, sitting up and checking the time. Fifteen minutes 'til his show. Plenty of time to hop in the shower. I check, first, and the privacy sign is on the door. Good tiger.

I'm pleasantly tired and still naked when the Today Show comes on. I lean back on the bed on my elbows, feeling more relaxed than I have since coming in Dev's muzzle back in his brother's room. When I see the promo for Dev, I sit up, tail twitching. I really want this to go well.

I have to sit through the news, and then they bring Dev out. He looks great on TV, in that dark grey suit setting off his orange stripes, with the Firebirds logo tie. He shakes the paw of the two hosts, the attractive vixen and the young stag, and sits down.

At first, it goes well. They lob him some softball questions about how it feels to be gay, to let his secrets out, and he says it feels great to be himself, and so on. He's doing pretty well at keeping his tail from betraying his tension; I can see it in the taps of his fingers on the chair. I'm just starting to relax again when the vixen leans in and soft-voices a question about his family.

He gets real stiff and stumbles over his generic answer. The

vixen, sensing trouble and an opportunity, presses, asking if there are problems. Don't raise your voice, I pray, don't raise your voice, and he doesn't, not that time.

But when the stag asks if his parents have met his boyfriend, and he just says "Yes" with enough ice to chill a cooler of beer, my prayers stop being answered. The hosts glance at each other before continuing. Before they can, Dev says, "Can we just talk about football?"

Oh, tiger. I want to turn the channel off, but I can't make myself do it.

The vixen gives a short laugh. "Does your boyfriend play football?"

Dev glowers at her. "It's not anybody on the team."

The stag jumps back in. "What didn't your parents like about him?"

"It wasn't—look, I'm not gonna get into that." Dev looks back and forth between them. I see him tensing, and I know he feels double-teamed. "Calm down, calm down," I say under my breath.

"Do they feel you're jeopardizing your football career?"

Please, I send in my thought-message, just say, I love my parents.

Clearly my psychic powers are as bad as my ability to be tactful with homophobic parents. "They don't care about—they don't think that," my painfully honest boyfriend says.

"Are they prejudiced?" The stag leans forward.

Dev looks flustered now. "That's not..."

The vixen chimes in, gently. "Did they support your decision to come out?"

"My parents have always been...have always supported me." I see the flash in his eyes, looking for the next question. But here, he can't just skip to the next reporter. He's trapped.

The stag takes his turn again. "Did you tell them you were going to come out?" When Dev doesn't answer, he goes on. "How long have they known you're gay? Did you tell them?"

Dev's fur is all sleek from the makeup, but I can see it prickling, and though they're not showing his tail, I'm sure it's lashing. "What does that have to do with anything?" he snaps. He starts to get up out of his chair; because he's facing the stag, it does almost look like he's going to go after him. The stag jumps back and almost topples his chair over.

I cover my eyes. The vixen says, with forced cheer, "Okay, boys, break it up." The silence seems to go on for hours, and finally I look back up again to see Dev sitting sulkily in his chair.

The interview is pretty much over at that point. The vixen asks, "What are you going to do to prepare for Gateway?" and Dev mumbles a bland "give it 110%" answer, and they cut to commercial.

But that's not it. When they come back, they joke for a little while about how Dev "didn't seem very happy," and how he was more jock than they'd expected. "You can tell why he's a good tackler," the stag says, "and why it might not be a good idea to talk about his sexuality on the field." That plays to the middle America audience, I'm sure, but it still sets my teeth on edge. Sure, he could've been more polite, but they could just recognize that all of us have problems: gay, straight, jock, TV personality.

Then all that is driven out of my mind by the commercial they show. It's Dev's commercial, the one we haven't seen yet. It takes me a moment to realize that, because it looks so foreign. The shirt he's wearing looks good on him. Really good. Like, touched-up-in-post good. I'm pretty sure that even naked, he doesn't have abs that defined. (Not that they look bad. Quite the contrary.) Over the "Ultimate Fit conforms to your body's shape," they focus a lot on his arms, his shoulders, and his butt. "Fit to bring out the best no matter what your species." Oh God, there's a shot of his package. It's framed by the abs and legs, so it's not super-obvious, but it's definitely there.

They must have worked on it for a day straight to have rushed it out by Sunday. And they obviously had someone who knew

exactly what would register with the gay community. I'm almost afraid to check Dev's e-mail now. And it ran during the football game, and his parents saw it…I stare numbly at the TV as the jovial weather forecaster comes on.

Even he makes a joke about Dev, saying, "Well, the clouds are going to clear up in the studio now that the football player's gone." He's an ass. I can't understand why people like him.

I turn off the TV and lie back on the bed again. Dev coming out should have made everything easier. I knew there'd be challenges, but they were supposed to be the kind of things we could meet head on instead of sneaking around them. We should be having discussions about gay identity, helping other athletes to come out, being a positive force. Instead we're getting dragged down into questions of who fucks whom, and what does your family think, and is everything that happens to you in your entire life now because you came out?

It's not quite eight, and Dev still has to leave the studio and get a cab back. That'll be nine at the earliest, and I'm hungry. Port City has great greasy diners, so there's sure to be something nearby. Right now I don't feel like eating healthy, and I have to get Morty his bagels. So I slip out of the hall, replacing the privacy sign, and jog down the stairs to the street.

The bustle of people, which I usually hate, is somehow comforting. I can lose myself in them. Scents and muzzle flash by me, a hundred a minute, and I don't have to remember any of them. None of them will know me. None of them cares whom I sleep with, none of them cares about my job or my family, or Dev's family. I presume some of them do care about his job, though; I see Devils caps and the occasional jersey. Dev'll be here playing them in about six weeks, and no doubt the Port City crowd will have the homophobic chants out in force.

They'll find something to rag on anyone about, though. Week ten at New Kestle, in the south, that's going to be tough too. I run over his schedule absently in my head. Kerina, affectionately

known as Chaw-ville, the next to last week of the season, is the only other away game in a fairly homophobic city. Hopefully by then some of the furor will have died down.

It's nice to hope that, but part of me knows it never will, that as long as he plays in the league he'll be "fag" or "HOMO-SKI" or any one of the other creative idiot things people think of to write on signs. It'd be nice to imagine someone else coming out, but all that depends on the reception Dev gets, and the aggressive play of the Millenport line doesn't bode well.

There's a reasonable-looking diner serving a bunch of eggs saturated in butter two and a half blocks from the hotel. I'm just crossing the street toward it when my phone rings. I glance at the number, weigh the conversation against the growling in my stomach, and decide, hell, I kind of want to hear what he thinks. I duck into the entryway of a store that isn't open yet.

"You're up early, Mister Kinnel."

"I saw your ex on TV. Didn't look too happy."

"Well, the questions were rather unfair."

He coughs. "I was just wondering if you knew what's going on with him and his parents. Did you ever meet them?"

I lean against the glass. Behind it, dresses and fabric glimmer in the morning sun. "Once."

"Did you get along?"

My thumb twinges. "They weren't thrilled."

"I find that hard to believe."

Quick, why would Duscha and Mikhail not like a vixen? Ah, my own mother provides the answer. "Let's just say his mother didn't see grandchildren in our future."

"Ah." He sighs. "If you and he didn't care, the parents should butt out. Not like he's gonna have cubs now, anyway."

"There's adopting. Surrogates."

"Sure. But if his folks didn't want that with him and a vixen, I don't reckon they'll be too excited about it now."

A wolf peers curiously in at the storefront, her ears perked. I

turn away. “Probably not. You think he should just do what his parents want?”

“Hell, no,” he says. “Never known a mom or dad did anything but screw up their kids’ love life.”

“Like Cim’s?”

He’s quiet. “Wasn’t her mom’s fault,” he says, gruff.

“But I gather she didn’t help.”

“Miss White…” He chuckles, without much humor. “Nah. Her mom didn’t help. But Cim’s Cim, y’know? Knew what she wanted when we got married. I can’t stop lovin’ her because I stopped bein’ what she wanted.”

“Maybe you could be,” I say. “Maybe she just didn’t have enough patience. Maybe her dad—or her mom—didn’t give you enough of a chance.”

“She gave me a—she gave me plenty.” He clears his throat. “You get any quotes from Miski about the game?”

I think back to things Dev said about the game that are safe enough to quote. I mix some of them around in my head and come up with a bland one. “He said, ‘Anytime someone goes after one of my teammates, they’re gonna have to answer to me.’”

“Shoot, that’s kinda what he told ESPN already. Nothin’ about what the boar said?”

“Sorry. He just said it doesn’t matter what people say, he’s going to pay attention to what they do.”

“Hm.” Keyboard clicks. “That’ll work. Thanks.”

“Glad to help.” I watch a pair of weasels, one white, one brown, chatting happily with each other as they walk by. “Mister Kinnel—”

“Call me Hal.”

I pause. “Mister Kinnel, did you think about leaving Cimarine?”

Two loud trucks go by. I press the phone to my ear. When they’re gone, I’m about to ask him to repeat what he said, but then he clears his throat. “To get the jump on her, y’mean?”

“More like…” My stomach growls. “More like, you knew you

weren't what she wanted any more. Like it'd be best for her if you left."

"You thought about leaving Miski? Guessed maybe he was gay? But you liked the fame?" I don't say anything. He exhales. "I thought about it. Sometimes."

"But you figured there might still be a chance. If you stayed."

"Yeah. Course, she wasn't gay. Makes it easier. Once y'know, I mean."

"You'd think so." I lean back against the glass. My stomach growls again. "I need to find some breakfast."

"Wait," he says. "Are you coming to Chevali again anytime soon?"

I step out of the store entryway and merge with the crowd, just another guy on his cell phone hopefully talking too softly for people to hear him putting on a husky vixen voice. "I have no plans to."

"Well, damn. I might just have to get myself up to Hilltown, then. Sounds busier up there than I remember it. I'd like to take a look around."

"I'm downtown," I say. "And I have to get going."

After breakfast and a trip to the bagel place, back in the hotel room, I check in with work.

"Hey," Alex says. "How's the vacation? Where are you?"

"Port City. I, uh," I tap my cast against my leg. "Sprained my thumb. Pretty bad."

"Ouch. Doing what?"

"Biking. Hit a bump, put my paw out to steady myself." Biking should be an athletic enough and yet believable activity for the office, where they know I don't do much outdoorsy stuff. "How's the office?"

"Paul won the belching contest."

"So what else is new?"

"One of my guys is out for the season with an ACL tear."

"Fuck." You hate to see that happen to anyone, but especially a

college kid. Recovery's better these days, but if you're not a top-tier prospect, you risk losing any shot at a pro paycheck. "Sorry."

"Happens. Your guys all okay?"

"Yeah. I need to get my assignments from Morty. He in?"

"Think so. Hang on. See you back here next week."

He transfers me to Morty, who asks the same questions about my vacation and, thank goodness, no questions about the Today Show. The games I have to do are up near Freestone, a few hours drive, so I tell him I'll just stay in Port City and rent a car on Friday. And that's it for work for the day.

I'm watching TV without really watching it when Dev walks through the door. He points a finger at me as I look up. "Don't say anything," he says.

I turn the set off. "I extended the stay. So we don't have to be out by noon," I clarify, when he frowns. "I need to go to a game here the day after tomorrow, so I'm just going to stay."

He stands still, watching me. He's quiet, looking not quite as depressed as he was after he lost the playoff game back in college. Finally, he says, "My plane's still at five to noon."

I reach up and rest my paw on his arm. "I thought you did a good job. Those questions weren't fair at all."

He exhales and flops down beside me. "Lion Jesus, they were assholes. Everyone was smirking at me on the way out."

"Did anyone hit on you?"

He focuses on me. "No. Wait. No, I don't think so."

"Okay, good."

That gets a smile. "Jealous?"

"Well," I say, "everyone knows you're gay, now. I'm gonna have to fight them all off."

"You don't have to worry about it, fox." He lashes his tail. "I wanted to punch that stag in the nose."

"I'm glad you didn't. That would've been worse. Although it would put to rest the myth that gay people are sissies."

He flexes his biceps, and that sparks another memory. "Oh," I

say. “I saw your commercial.”

After I tell him about it, I have to stop him from calling Ogleby and firing him then and there. I point out that he’s still getting paid for it and that it’s not all that bad. The timing’s unfortunate, for sure, but he looks great in the commercial and hopefully it’ll lead to more endorsement deals and more money.

“Why do you care about the money, all of a sudden?” he asks, staring at me.

“I always cared about money,” I say, trying to dodge his unexpected perceptiveness. “I mean, I’m going to keep staying in these hotel rooms, so I need to make sure you can keep paying for them.”

“Oh, speaking of.” He pulls his wallet out of his suit and hands me three hundreds. “For the room. You should probably get another one under your name. I’ll check out of this one.”

I stare at the money. All sorts of symbolism run through my head, making me not want to take it. I can afford to pay for my own hotel room. I could probably get work to pay for at least part of it, if not the whole stay. But I don’t want to argue with Dev, so I reach out and take the cash from him.

9

Ultimate Fit (Dev)

This fucking day is just getting better and better. I'm tired from getting up at five, I got lost on the way to the station, and the people getting me ready for the show just treated me like an annoyance they had to deal with. And I don't even wanna think about the show itself. Then the guy in the cab on the way back is a wiseass, and a Port City Devils fan on top of that, and I come back here to find out that I've starred in a softcore gay porn commercial. I kinda want to fuck Lee, because he's about the only thing right about this day, but he's all dressed and I have to leave for the airport in an hour. If I'm enough of a prick that we get into a fight, we could have angry sex or make-up sex. If I just press him, I'm sure he'd have those pants off in a minute. My sheath gets nice and warm-hard at the thought, but the whole day just weighs down on me. I don't have the energy to do anything else. I can't believe it's only nine-thirty.

Lee tucks the money away into his pocket, his ears kinda flat like they get when he's thinking too hard about something. "I know it sucks," I say. "But you don't want to have to deal with all this, do you?" I gesture at the TV.

There's a bit of a tense moment, and then his ears come up. "No," he says. "You're right." And he kisses me.

I hold his head, kissing back, and there's a moment there, a heart-racing moment in the way he feels against me and his scent

in my nose and his tongue in my mouth. It goes beyond 'the only thing right about this day' to 'holy fuck, yes,' and almost makes me change my mind about getting undressed. But when we separate, he's just got his ears half-up. Relaxed, not aroused. "Listen," he says, "it's a stupid interview. Don't worry about it. Don't worry about the commercial. You just take care of playing football."

The knot in my upper chest eases just a little. "Easy for you to say."

He looks more vulpine when he grins than any other fox I know, and when he grins the way he's grinning at me now, I feel a tingle up and down my spine. It could mean *uh-oh*, or it could mean *something exciting's going to happen,* or it could mean *I'm the luckiest tiger in the world*. I snort at him, not knowing what else to do, and he says, "It's easy for you to do, too. Just think about me like I was this morning."

"Even when I'm showering?"

He stretches his grin a bit. "Whatever you need."

I sigh. "I don't think we have time for me to get what I need."

His uninjured paw brushes my side. His blue eyes sparkle. "You'd be surprised what we can do in half an hour."

"Yeah, but we'd have to shower after."

"I wouldn't." He winks. "I'll just go check into the hotel smelling of tiger."

Goddamn him. I'm all the way hard now, and he knows it. Thinking about him walking around after I've been inside him shouldn't turn me on, but it kinda does. A little of it is the danger, and a little of it is the fact that I know it turns him on. I take a breath. "I don't want to wait for Sunday night," I say, with effort. "But I need to go catch the plane."

"Sunday night will be here before you know it. And so will I." He doesn't look too disappointed, just resigned.

I kiss him good-bye and squeeze his body against mine, and I spend half the cab ride wondering why he looked so self-satisfied on my way out. I spend the other half of the cab ride debating

whether I should just cancel the flight, go back to Chevali tomorrow, and go back to the hotel today. The imagining makes for a nice ride, overall, leaning my head against the window to stare out at the glass canyons across the bridge to the airport, where the sun breaks through the clouds as we pull up to the departures area.

At the curb, one of the skycaps takes my bag and says, "Saw you on TV." He's smiling, but I can't tell whether it's a snide smile or a sincere one, so I just say, "Thanks" in return. I wonder whether he saw the Today Show or the commercial, or maybe both, and I get angry all over again at the stag, but it's not the consuming anger it was earlier. It's muted by thoughts of Lee, and then I realize that that's why he was wearing that smug expression. He knew he'd distracted me enough to get my mind off the interview. And that helps me realize that he was right, that it's not that important overall.

I take out my phone and text him a quick, *Thanks, fox,* while waiting to go through security.

He responds fifteen minutes later, as I'm at the gate: *11:10 am You're welcome. :) Have a good flight*. I weigh the phone, smiling, and lean back. The message indicator is blinking all the time, now, reminding me of Ogleby. I look up at the gate information, the name "CHEVALI" up there in big letters. I thumb Ogleby's number.

He picks up in mid-sentence. I think he started talking to me before he accepted the call. "—worry about that interview, I swear it looked great, you should hire one of those makeup people, did you get the messages about the sponsors—"

"Ogleby," I say, cutting across him. "I'll deal with you and that commercial later. I'm about to get on a plane. Then I'm going to be at practice."

"The commercial was great! They love—"

"I want you to handle all my calls from now on, okay? Don't send me messages every time you get one. I'll call you once a week and we'll deal with things then. Otherwise I'm gonna focus on

football. This is…this is important."

"Dev, honey, I swear it'll only take a minute. The guys from Colman's Sporting Goods called, Jeff Colman called himself, they want you to come down there—"

"Once a week," I say. "I'll call you."

"Sure, that's great, but can you just—"

"I'm only doing this because I don't have time to find another agent. Impress me."

That shuts him up. I say a quick good-bye, click the phone off, and put it away. It doesn't take long for me to notice the people staring at me and whispering to their neighbors. I stretch out my legs, link my paws behind my head, and close my eyes, ignoring them. The picture of Lee in my mind makes them all go away. But then I picture the cast on his paw, and I think about my parents watching the commercial, and my chest gets tight again.

The one good thing about the interview is that it got me angry at the stag instead of at my father. When he asked about my parents, I got that none-of-your-business feeling and that reminded me that whatever else he's done, Dad's still my dad. Mom's still my mom. No matter what, we're all in this together.

I can't help feeling that I could've handled the whole visit better, that I let them down somehow. Like when I was escorting a crying Marcia home, years ago. Like when I'd talk to them on the phone from my dorm room at Forester, when I was starting for an unremarkable football school and doing nothing exceptional, when I was drifting through life. Before I met Lee.

Lee. My fox just couldn't be quiet and leave well enough alone. He had to be prickly, had to stand up to Dad, had to keep pushing him. I mean, sure, Dad's social sensibilities are dated to about 1850, but he's not going to change overnight. God, if Lee could just have left him alone…

If he could've left him alone, he wouldn't be my fox. If Mom and Dad could just let me do whatever I want, they wouldn't be my parents. I have to find some way that they can live together,

somehow, because I can't give them up, not any of them.

I board with the rest of the first class passengers. By now there are a dozen people watching me. I can't not see them; I can't turn off the football reflexes of scanning the people around me and trying to guess what they're going to do. All I can do is ignore them.

Sitting in first class, I'm flipping through the airline magazine when the stewardess clears her throat. Only it's not a stewardess, it's a male flight attendant, a thin, perky fossa beaming at me. "Drink, sir?"

"Sure, thanks, Barry," I read his name off the tag. "Just a beer, something not light."

The kangaroo next to me holds up his paw, but Barry's already gone for my beer. When he comes back, he's got an extra bottle along with it. "In case you need another one and I'm not around. I'll be with you in just one moment, sir," he says to the kangaroo.

"Thanks," I say. He's still focusing on me, as if waiting for something. "Um, Firebirds fan?" I reach for the pen in the pocket of my jacket, and look around for something to sign.

He shakes his head. "I hate football. But my parents kicked me out too."

I start to tell him my parents didn't kick me out, but he's almost got tears in his eyes, so I just give him a nod. "Well, thank you," I say. "And good luck."

"I'm fine," he says. "But good luck to you. It gets better, I promise you."

I sit up straighter. "Did your parents finally come around?"

"Oh, no," he says brightly. "But my boyfriend helped me realize that if they weren't going to accept me, to hell with them."

"Oh." I wrap my paw around the beer he sets down. "I guess I've got a ways to go."

He gives me a big smile. "I hope you have someone special to help you."

I give a noncommittal nod and a smile back, which gets another

wink from him. “Sorry. Don’t mean to pry. Listen, if you need anything else on the flight, just let me know.” Then he turns to the kangaroo, who is supremely uninterested in any aspect of our conversation that doesn’t result in him getting a rum and Coke.

Even though I really don’t want to go where Barry’s gone, his cheerful support makes me feel a little better. Besides, being on a plane has always given me a nice sense of isolation. Coach tells us that when we get on the plane after a road game, we should use that time to gain perspective. He says to look at the game from thirty thousand feet.

I use that now, closing my eyes, leaving the interview and the commercial behind in Port City and thinking about the upcoming game. A week and a half away—seems like forever. My fingers clench and unclench on the armrest, though I keep my claws restrained; I cannot wait to get back out on the field again. All of this crap with my family, with the Today Show, it’s frustrating, hard to get a grasp on. Running plays, blocking, tackling: that I can do. I haven’t gone three days without it since, what, June? Early July maybe? At least three months. I stare out the window at the clouds. The plane can’t land fast enough.

Barry’s so attentive during the flight that I feel like I have to tip him. I don’t know how to talk to him though. Lee would know, would be able to put him at ease and trade jokes with him, and by the time we landed, he’d have gotten a free flight somewhere or something. I look at the kangaroo sitting next to me, crammed into a business suit stretched over his gut, with crumbs all over his pants from the lunch we had, currently absorbed in a book even I know is a waste of time. I hate the fact that he’s not Lee.

I know how Lee feels, that his job could be at stake, that he would be subjected to a lot of media attention, and I can’t fault him for wanting to avoid all that. We got through a year and a half of me being closeted. I can get through another year or two of separate lives. Hopefully all this hoopla dies down in a few months, or a year at the outside, and then we can travel together,

be seen in public, and go...

Well, maybe go to *his* home. I shift my weight in the seat and look out the window. The ground's getting closer.

We land at one-thirty, and I get to the field at five to two. Gerrard's probably there already. Hopefully I can get a few good hours of practice in, maybe grab dinner with the guys and practice more after. In the parking lot, I find more cars than I thought there'd be. Must be not just the linebackers coming in for practice.

Still, the complex is eerily empty. There are a few people moving around, but I'm used to it buzzing with activity. As I get closer to the locker room, I hear familiar voices: Gerrard; Vonni and Norton, the fox and cheetah who start at cornerback; Brick's low rumble joined by another, whom I assume is Pike.

It's only the defense, and only starters. Colin and Zillo aren't anywhere to be seen. Gerrard is in uniform, and so is Carson. The rest are changing. They all stop as I come in.

For a moment, the room's quiet. Then Norton, the cheetah, wolf-whistles. There's laughter and snickering.

I sigh and toss my stuff at the foot of my locker. "So, you saw the commercial, huh?"

Vonni and Norton are nearest me, standing in front of their lockers. "Say, Dev," they say in synchronized, girly voices, "can you get us some Ultimate Fit gear?"

My ears flush, but I force myself to grin. More guys are chuckling now, and I think about how much worse it would be if they were all quiet, pretending it didn't happen. The commercial really is something of a joke. "Dunno," I say. "Do you want a lot of gay fan mail?"

They laugh, but a little uneasily. Gerrard walks over. "All right," he says. "Get dressed and let's practice. No pads."

Coach and Steez and the defensive coordinator come in a moment later, with new pages for our playbooks. Coach hands them out to us. "Good to see you all here. Shows a real commitment to winning. We have a lot of adjustments on defense

for next week's game, losing Fisher and goin' up against Bixon." That's Gateway's star, the wolverine Dad was talking about. "The defensive coaches have been working on a game plan, and I want you all in here working on it every day 'til the game."

"Except Sunday," Gerrard says.

"Right." Coach gestures toward Gerrard with the clipboard. "Day off is Sunday instead of Monday. Might be a good day to watch football with each other. Now let's get out there."

There's a lot of tackling dummies, sprints, fitness workouts. Then we get down to changing some of our plays. It reminds me of a few months ago when I was learning a whole new position. Frustrating, because I feel like I've just started getting the hang of this one, and now it's getting all changed up on me. But the fact is, Pike replacing Fisher on my side changes the way we have to protect that line. Fisher, a tiger, was more mobile, able to switch off the offensive tackle to take the running back if they ran it to that side. A polar bear's going to be a lot more effective at collapsing the running lanes, but if the running back slips past him, he can't change direction in time to help.

So it's up to me to back him up, which you'd think would mean I have less responsibility for protecting passes, that they could drop one of the safeties in to help out. But no, the only change on passing plays is that I have to keep an eye on the quarterback more closely if he runs out to my side. We don't have any offensive players to scrimmage with today, so we're only being shown the plays and practicing where to start, the scripted parts of the play that take us up to the point where we have to make a judgment about what's going on. There's a lot of yelling from the coaches, and the minor tension in the locker room ratchets up further between us. At one point, Vonni yells at me, "Pretend someone's got a camera on you!"

Once we're worn out on the field, we get to go to a film session, breaking down the Gateway offense, tracking their formations, taking notes. Coach shows us some plays from the Millenport

game, including the one where Fisher got injured. I look at myself on the screen, backpedaling like an idiot while Fisher's left to handle the bear and boar. Nobody else remarks on it, but I feel the hot flush of guilt and silently promise Fisher I'll get better. When we switch to film of Gateway, I stare at it, intent on absorbing as much as I can.

After practice, Gerrard grabs the starters to go to Mickey's in downtown Chevali, as usual. But the mood in the locker room is still a little edgy, and not just at me. Pike is overwhelmed by the changes and the pressure of the starting role, so he's going out of his way to tell people how easy it all is. Norton is still arguing with Vonni about a play he thinks the fox screwed up, getting right in his face. Vonni stays cool for a little while, but shoves Norton away from him when the cheetah gets too close. I tell Norton to chill out, and he snaps, "Learn your own plays, Ultimate Fit." I'm thinking I might just bail and get a couple burgers on the way home.

I start to tell Gerrard as much, on our way out of the facility, but I'm interrupted by Charm's elbow, smacking me hard enough to knock me to the side. "You sexy thang," he says. "Hope I look half that good at your age."

"I didn't know what they were doing with the commercial," I protest.

"You can't tell when they got a camera pointed at yer junk?" He raises an eyebrow. "'Cause me, I always know when someone's lookin'. You comin' to dinner?"

"What, with you?" But Gerrard is standing there, one eyebrow raised. "You're coming with them?"

"Yeah. Come on." Charm slaps me on the back, and Gerrard jerks his head for me to follow him. I shake my head and head over to Mickey's.

We get a big table in the back. The beers keep coming, the burgers and onion rings disappear fast, and the stories shoot back and forth across the table. Slowly, the locker room tension dissipates. I get asked about the Today Show, but all questions

about how good the food is backstage, and whether the vixen is as pretty in real life. “Ask him about the stag,” Charm calls down the table.

“He was an ass,” Norton says. The cheetah and I are sitting with the jaguars Carson and Pace, with Gerrard and Vonni next to us.

“They’re just trying to be controversial,” Gerrard says. “It’s their job. Just stay away from them.”

“Not all of ’em.” Norton’s been in the league ten years, hasn’t lost a step. “Not the ones who know our business.”

“They all just want to sell airtime.” Gerrard points a finger at the cheetah. “We can’t let it break up our team.”

Norton shrugs, and that’s the end of it. To my great relief, nobody asks me about Lee. Nobody asks me about my parents. The teasing about the commercial is softer, with an undercurrent of congratulations. Only Gerrard and one of the D-linemen has been in a commercial before, and neither of them was in one by himself.

We sit around for an hour after we finish the food, just shooting shit and relaxing. Gerrard warns me to stop drinking ’cause he wants to do more work after dinner, and I don’t complain about how long a day it’s been. It’s not the whole team, but just seeing the change in attitude from the locker room to the dinner helps take my mind off everything. I’m recharged when Gerrard grabs me and Carson to head back to the field.

Chevali in mid-October is nice and warm, comfortable as we go over plays and go out on the field to work on spacing and communication. Since there’s nobody else lining up opposite us, we’re limited in what we can do, and I have to imagine the formations as Gerrard barks them out. It gets me and Carson used to listening to his reads. Sometimes he’ll shout out a formation and then change to another one, and I have to imagine the offense shifting, boars and bears, the wolf dropping back behind them with the football as he calls the snap. Now, when I look in my imagination for the running back, I see the Gateway wolverine charging toward me.

For two hours, I endure Gerrard yelling at me. “Skip double right means they’re pulling left!” he yells. “You need to break left right away at the snap!” Or “It’s a passing down! Drop back first, *then* wait for the slot receiver!” Carson, much more in tune with Gerrard, doesn’t get yelled at nearly as often.

Even though there’s less physical work in two hours than we did in fifteen minutes that afternoon, I’m exhausted by the time Gerrard calls it quits. “Again tomorrow,” he says as we head in, and it’s not a question.

“Sure.” I nod, gathering my things. My phone has the usual assortment of missed calls and texts from reporters. I wonder briefly why Ogleby hasn’t started using text messages and then thank God he hasn’t, because my mailbox would be full within two days. I’m scanning them when Gerrard comes over, Carson behind him.

“Hey,” he says. “We’re getting together at my place to watch the games Sunday. You want to come?”

“Sure.” I should be done in time to get Lee from the airport. I thumb through a few more messages. “Thanks.”

“It’s gonna be the three of us, maybe some other guys from the D,” he says. “Significant others welcome.”

That gets me to look up from my phone. “Huh?”

“Yours, too.” He’s not really smiling, but then, I don’t know when he ever does just for the heck of it. His voice is a little stiff.

“Okay,” I say. “Thanks, uh, but I don’t know…”

“Nobody there will have a problem with it,” he says, with very typically Gerrard-ish determination. His ears are confidently up and his jaw is set.

“I dunno if he’ll be able to make it,” I say, as if that’s what I was going to say all along. “He works weekends.” I still get a weird little twinge when I say “he” to the guys.

Gerrard’s ears flick. Relief? I can’t really tell. For a coyote, with big ears and the expressive tail, he’s almost feline in how he keeps himself buttoned down. I can’t get a read on his scent over the

ever-present sanitizer and the smell of laundry and shower soap, and, of course, the smell of two dozen guys having just worked out. But whatever Gerrard's feeling, he says, "If he likes football, he's welcome."

The whole way home, I keep tossing back and forth how I feel about Lee coming to hang out with the team. I can only imagine what he'd say to Gerrard and Carson. Homophobia, culture of violence, oh, there's probably more that he could think of over the course of an afternoon. But all the same, to have him there, to be able to sit next to him in a group of people, like we did when we went out to dinner with Fisher...

I toss my luggage into a corner, sink down onto the couch, and stare out the window, holding the phone. My heart beats faster, thinking about introducing him to the team. It thrills and terrifies me. If he alienated the team like he did my family, I don't know if I could take it. I wouldn't have anywhere to go. But Lee wouldn't do that, not after yesterday (was it really just yesterday?).

Then again, was Gerrard asking because he wanted to? He wouldn't normally care about doing anything outside of football. For him to be interested in watching with me and Carson, I can see that. For him to include SOs? I can't figure why. All he cares about is playing the game. So is he doing this of his own volition, and it just feels weird because it's Gerrard? Or did someone tell him to do it? He wouldn't ask if he didn't mean it anyway, so does it really matter?

The problem is that the best person to help me work through this is Lee himself. I can't ask him whether or not I should invite him to Gerrard's. Of course he'll want to come. But I can't think of anyone else to call, until I pull up the phone menu.

It's obvious, really. I have a question about whether someone really means what they say. Who better to ask than an actress? I haven't talked to her since she left the press conference, but she did wish me good luck as we parted, so I don't think she hates me for ruining our fake relationship.

She picks up after two rings. “I’m only answering because I can’t imagine what you’d need from me, and I’m curious.”

I chuckle. “Hi to you, too, Caroll. How’s it going?”

“Amusingly enough, your little coming-out party has kept me rather busy with interviews. How long did I know, could I tell in bed, and so on.”

“*Could* you tell in bed?”

She laughs. “I blink my eyes at them and tell them I absolutely could not tell in bed. Which is true.”

“I’m glad you’re doing okay.”

She softens. “Thanks. How are you doing?”

“Oh, up and down. Can I ask you something?”

So I lay it out for her, Lee’s tendency to be difficult, my questions about Gerrard. She makes several “uh-huh” noises, and then says, “You want him to be there.”

I lean back on the couch and close my eyes. “I guess I do. I just don’t want it to go wrong.”

“If you’re that worried about things going wrong, why are you still with him?”

I don’t answer that right away. She goes on. “Isn’t a relationship supposed to be about helping each other out?”

“Yeah.” I draw out the word, postponing any further explanation.

“So if he’s not helping you…”

I can’t tell practical, business-minded Caroll. “I just want to know if you think Gerrard really wants me to bring him.”

“You know him better than I do,” she says. “But I say if he asked, then he means it. And if you want to keep in good with him, you’ll do what he says.”

She has a point. But I’m still not convinced. So I ask her about her agent, and her movies, and she tells me she saw the Today Show and she gives me a few pointers (“always imagine your answers as a front-page headline in a newspaper before you say them”), and we hang up. And I realize, looking out at the stars in

the clear Chevali night, that I still don't know whether I should ask Lee to fly down earlier Sunday.

Maybe he won't be able to anyway. Maybe he won't want to come, after this past week. Maybe I can tell him to behave himself.

Yeah, and maybe I can wave my paws and make nobody care that I'm gay.

Phone to my ear, I listen to the rings on his end. He picks up after three. "Hi," I say.

10

Schooling (Lee)

I have a Thursday afternoon and nothing to do in Port City, so I arrange to go to dinner with Aunt Carolyn, Mother's sister. She lives in the artsy section of Port City, down near Cottage Hill, and she's my favorite aunt. I haven't seen her in months, maybe more than a year. But I want to tell her about Dev's father, and I don't want to do it over the phone. I know she'll be cool.

I do all this while waiting for my room to be ready. I had to get my stuff out of Dev's room by noon, and when I checked in with his wad of cash, they told me my room wouldn't be ready 'til three. So I set myself up in the lobby, using the hotel's wireless to check e-mail. Once I've written and sent off my reports from the previous weekend's games and read up on my assignments for the coming weekend, I decide to check Dev's e-mail again, to get some reaction to the show.

To my relief, it's mostly positive. Of course, there are the usual idiots, who make me think, "you went to all the trouble to find his e-mail just so you could tell him you hate him?" But by and large, the people who wrote are all sympathetic. One catches my eye.

Dear Mister Miski, I'm a player at a small college and I wanted to tell you how much it inpsires me that you came out. I've known I was gay since I was 17 and I knew if I wanted to play football I could never tell anyone. So I've been hiding who I am all through college, and it tears me up. I take out my frustration on the football field and I think

that's why I do so well (I play defensive tackle). I get drunk a lot because I keep trying to hook up with girls so nobody will know I'm gay. I thought there couldn't be any other football players who were gay. But you gave me hope. I don't know if I can come out like you did but maybe someday. Thank you so much. Good luck. I'll be watching and rooting for you, and maybe someday I can come out too. I hope I might get to meet you someday.

Best wishes, Vince

I let the other work languish and read the letter over again. This is actually the second e-mail he's gotten from a gay football player, but the other was a lot less specific: *Good for you, but don't expect me to help you.* I don't even know if the guy was active or retired.

This e-mail grabs me, and not just because he can generally spell ('inspires' typo aside). I type up a reply, quickly, telling him that I'm Dev's assistant and that I'm passing his letter on to Dev. I wish him good luck and tell him that there are a lot of gay football players, and he shouldn't feel like he's alone. As the reply is sending, I notice his e-mail address: viking01@cobblestone.edu. At first I think it's a nickname, like he's the Viking, and then I realize it's probably just the school's abbreviation: Vi for Vince, and his last name must be King or Kingston or something. I look up cobblestone.edu and find Cobblestone College, a small liberal arts school about an hour and a half from Port City and two hours from the first game I need to attend on Saturday in Freestone. If things go smoothly this weekend, maybe I'll stop by and see Mr. King play.

The uplift I get from that letter overrides most of the bad feeling from that morning, if not the last few days. The hand cast makes typing painful, and every time I hit the wrong key because of it, I hear Dev's father and I feel his paw grabbing my hand again.

For now, we don't need to make any decisions about what to do. The next big thing is Thanksgiving, but that's a whole month

away. A month ago, I would never have even dreamed I'd have been meeting Dev's parents, nor that he'd have been interviewed for pieces on just about every major sports network and publication. So who knows what another month will bring, right?

That thought doesn't make my aching paw feel any better. I take two more of the analgesics so I can keep typing 'til I can get into my room. There I lie down until it's time for dinner.

Aunt Carolyn is a bright red fox who probably dyes her fur, but I only know that because nobody else in the family has fur that bright. She meets me at Maroney's, a sports bar owned by the former football star, with a gleaming smile and a suffocating hug. Her earrings jingle next to my ears as she nuzzles me.

"Wiley, sit on down and tell me what you've been—what happened to your paw?" She sits across from me in the booth, her neck surrounded by a cloud of filmy scarves of all different colors, her blue jacket adorned with a lapis and mother-of-pearl brooch.

"Domestic violence." I give her a rueful grin.

She narrows her eyes. "Bren didn't do that to you."

"No, and it wasn't Mother, either." I order a soft drink, because I shouldn't be drinking while taking pain pills. She gets a wine that isn't on the menu, with a smile to the coyote taking our order. "I got to meet my boyfriend's parents this week," I say when the coyote's gone.

"I gather they don't approve of their son having a boyfriend. Wolf?"

"Tiger. In fact..." I hesitate, but not for long. "How much do you follow sports?"

She doesn't, but Dev's press conference was big news in Cottage Hill, the gay neighborhood near where she works, so she's heard of him. She leans forward with a very gratifying smile and says, "You're the secret boyfriend? My nephew? Oh, wait 'til the gals at the bookstore hear that."

I flatten my ears. "Uh, I don't..."

She laughs and rests her paw on mine. "I'm kidding. Seriously,

is it a good thing? So what happened with the parents?"

I tell her the story, trying to be as objective as I can, but I can't resist saying Dev's father's lines in the Siberian Bond villain voice. It's less scary that way, less real. She arches an eyebrow when I'm done. "I'm impressed you managed to learn just enough Siberian to send his father into a violent rage. Not surprised. But impressed."

"Certain words stick in my head." I rub the cast, even though I can't feel the rubbing at all.

"I suppose I'm one to talk." Her eyes focus somewhere over my shoulder. "Someday I'll tell you about the argument I had with your Gran, about moving down to this neighborhood. 'Oh, it's full of slackers and felines,' she said." She comes back to me. "That's the condensed version. It went on for months. But do you think there's any chance they'll come around?"

"His mom, maybe." I sigh.

"You're going to have to do what it takes," she says. "Compromises and sacrifices. If he's worth that to you." One of her fingers toys with her earrings. "Personally, you know, I'm past that whole sacrificing thing. But you're young."

"I don't know what I can sacrifice," I say. "I don't have the money for a sex change."

"I doubt that'd help anyway. Though they do amazing things with pheromones these days. Even us canids can't tell the difference."

I laugh. "I'll give up a lot for him, but I'm rather attached to my anatomy."

She settles back in the booth, the corners of her mouth twitching upward. "I rather suspect he is, too. Well, you know, your father has a sister who went through something like that."

I straighten up, ears perking. "I have an aunt who was an uncle?"

"No. Well, maybe. I don't know all of your father's family. But I remember Bren telling me there was this kerfuffle when she wanted to marry a fox from overseas. Muslim. Her church didn't

take well to that, but she loved him and she said, to hell with all of you."

"Really?" I only know my two uncles on my father's side. I know that he had a sister, but not much about her.

"This was before you were born. People find all sorts of reasons to cut other people out of their lives. If I knew how to get in touch with her, I would send her Christmas cards."

It's a particularly touching remark, considering I never see Carolyn at family dinners or holidays. "Father still talks to you, doesn't he?"

She nods. "More than my own sister does. You know, your mom and I and your uncle Jona were all terrible disappointments to your Gran. She wanted us to all be part of the social circles of Port City. I ran off to be a hippie, Eileen moved to the midwest to be boring, and Jona..." She takes a drink of wine. "Made some bad choices."

I met Uncle Jona once, when I was ten. Before he died in prison. "Yeah. Runs in the family maybe."

"You're not to blame for your parents' troubles."

The abrupt shift catches me off guard. "What?"

"After they met your tiger—Bren didn't tell me he was a tiger—he tried to talk to Eileen about it."

"I'd think he would have better luck than I did." I try to imagine my father and mother talking about me and my boyfriend. I can't picture it.

She sighs heavily. "Eileen is stubborn. I think she worries about a lot of the wrong things." Her eyes meet mine with a sparkle. "If I'd had a son, I would've said they switched the cubs at the hospital."

I smile back. She has, in fact, said this in the past, but she knows I like it. "We don't get to pick our family," I say, as usual.

"But we do get to pick who we're with." Her ears flick forward toward me. "So what are you going to do?"

I sigh. "What can I do?"

Her eyes glint at me. “You can say, to hell with all of you. Come live with me in Port City.”

“I don’t think he’d go for that. Even if I tell him how awesome you are.”

“You sure? We have a football team here, too. I think they’re pretty good. They keep having parades every few years.”

I stick my tongue out. “Everyone else in the country hates them.”

“Oh, well. The invitation’s open.” And, as our food arrives, she reaches over to squeeze my paw. “The other thing to remember is I’ve had a dozen serious boyfriends in the last eight years. If it doesn’t work out with this one, there’ll be another one.”

“I suppose so,” I say. For once, I can’t say what I really want to Aunt Carolyn. To tell her that there aren’t any other ones like Dev would sound soppy and foolish and not at all like her clever, worldly nephew. But dammit, it’s true.

SHE DRIVES me back to the hotel; I won’t pick up my rental car ’til tomorrow. Morty probably wouldn’t care, but I can’t bring myself to charge an extra day if I don’t need to. We kiss good-bye, I promise to be in touch more often, and she tells me to make sure I take care of myself.

I’ve just gotten undressed and stretched out in bed with the TV on when my cell phone rings. I’m tired, but I never turn down a phone call from Dev. It’s good to hear his voice again, even though I just saw him that morning. He tells me about his day of practice; I tell him about Aunt Carolyn, and though I don’t tell him everything, I do tell him that I told her about him.

“So do I get to meet her?”

“Sure.” I go through the calendar in my head. “You’re playing here in what, five weeks? I’ll find a discreet place where we can have dinner with her. I’ll go in drag. She works for a theater. She’ll

love it."

He laughs. "I can't wait to meet her."

"Hey," I ask, because Aunt Carolyn made me think of my father. "Talked to your folks at all?"

I expect the silence. "Talked to Mom," he says, his voice flat. Just as I'm about to ask, he goes on. "She says she asked Dad to apologize."

I give him a few seconds before I chime in. "I'm guessing that didn't go well."

"I apologized to her. I told her we didn't do anything with the lube, that it just fell out of your suitcase."

I start to protest that that's a lie, because we did do something, but technically he's right, I guess, we didn't do anything with the lube. Then I want to know if he actually said the word, 'lube.' That's not important, really. But I still want to know. "And?"

"I think she felt better. She asked about you. I told her your thumb was going to be okay."

"In eight to ten weeks. It still hurts." Just talking about it makes it twinge, frustratingly.

"I know."

I want to ask him more, to find out what else he talked to his mom about. I want to know if he's going to talk to his father later. I can't think of a way to ask him that won't result in him clamming up tight. So I just say, "I hope it works out," and he says, "yeah," and then there's a bit of silence.

He finally breaks it. "Um…"

I yawn. The day's catching up to me. "What?"

He pauses. "Anything interesting in e-mail?"

"Oh, yeah. There's a kid at a college near here who's a defensive tackle and he's gay. I think I'm going to try to see him before my first game. Or maybe between games. The second one's just a small school anyway."

"Defensive tackle, so he's a tiger?"

"Or a bear. I don't know, though. I'll tell you Sunday night,

right?"

"Sure." He takes a deep breath and pauses, so long that I would interrupt him if I didn't feel he was about to say something. So I wait, and he does. "Hey. Gerrard and a bunch of the guys are getting together Sunday to watch football."

"Okay. At night? Should I get a cab?"

"No. He, uh...he told me I could bring you."

I stop to digest that. Meet the other guys on the team? "Just me? Or are the other wives—I mean, the wives—"

He talks quickly. "Yeah, everyone else can bring their SOs, that what he said."

"Wow. Okay." I look down at the cast on my paw. "Do you want me to come?"

"Hell, doc," he says. "I want you to, but..."

He doesn't finish. "I know," I say. I close my eyes. "You and me in a room full of football players. Do I have to wear a dress?"

"I want *you* there." He presses the word gently. "Gerrard says all the guys will be cool."

But can I be cool with them? With the macho posturing I've spent most of my life hating? Well, I do it for work every week. Maybe it's time I gave it a try with people who are reaching out, trying to be my friends. "Will Fisher be there? He knows me."

"I don't know. Haven't heard from him."

"You jocks," I say lightly. "I'll call Gena. I haven't talked to her since the day of the injury. How about Aston? Will he be there?"

He laughs. "You want an autograph?"

"I'll get an autograph from Gerrard. I want to ask Aston if he's really sucked off Billy Joe the ferret."

He takes a moment to think about that, or to let the comment sink in. "You're staying home, fox."

I smile, knowing he can hear it even if he can't see it. "I'll be good, hon. I promise. I only got one good paw left. I'm not gonna do anything to risk it."

"What if one of them starts being all hetero at you?"

"What does that even mean?"

The couch creaks as he resettles himself. "I don't know. I mean, what if one of them gets obnoxious?"

"I thought you said they were gonna be cool."

"There'll be beer there," he says.

"Ah. Of course." I rub a paw down my stomach. "I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, but..."

There's no more words necessary. We can take care of ourselves, we both know that. But can we be ourselves outside of our apartments and hotel rooms? Before this week, we wouldn't have felt the need to pause for that little silence. So I gather my courage and break it. "You know, I'll...I'll do my best. I tried, you know."

He breathes softly into the phone. "I know you did," he says.

FALL in the northeast is different from the Midwest. Not really prettier or anything, just different. All the buildings are older, but they look more dignified: the old buildings in the Midwest all look like they belong in retirement homes. Here in the northeast, they've been standing two or three times as long, and they were built in a different time, a time of personal craftsmanship and expression, not the get-the-buildings-up-before-the-next-wave-of-immigrants-arrives rush of so many places back home.

That said, there's some aloofness to them, too. At home in Hilltown, I can walk around the venerable old Public Library and not feel like it belongs to a totally separate time. It's still family. The Public Library next to the Cobblestone College campus in Haiwatset (the town names out here are even weird in just slightly different ways), by contrast, was clearly built by Important People. Just walking past it, I get the impression that I'm being suffered to occupy the same block. It's all red marble and Doric columns and

big gryphon sculptures clearly trying to be as important as the Port City Library gryphons.

Cobblestone College itself is not quite as pretentious, but many of the well-dressed students do fairly radiate smug. I feel their condescension at my off-the-rack business suit as I search out the football field Saturday morning. On most of the campuses I visit, you can find the football field the day of a game just by following the crowds, but here at Cobblestone, football is clearly a diversion for the plebes. I follow a trio of weasels in sweatshirts with the double-C logo, and find myself at a surprisingly charming small field, with only a couple thousand people in attendance.

I buy a program and prepare my scout credentials to get a sideline seat, but it turns out not to be necessary. The students on the bench scoot over happily to let me sit down, and pepper me with questions about my PDA until I ask them to wait for breaks in the action. Then I tell them I'm a college scout, though I can't tell them whom I'm here to observe.

It does explain the paw-sized video recorder I use to get game film, which fortunately I can rig up with a strap to fit around my cast. I can't see any TV cameras here, not even the college TV station, if there is one. I feel like Cobblestone might consider TV too lowbrow for them. And yet, they scraped together thirty-odd guys to play football.

I don't need the program to pick out Vince King, though I did need it to confirm that that is his name. When Cobblestone's defense comes out, there are three bears on the line, and one stays aloof from the others. But when the play starts, he's vicious, getting to the opposing quarterback twice for sacks and three more times for pressures, dropping the running back in the backfield six times, disrupting plays right and...well, he plays right tackle, so mostly to the right.

There's no question he's got motivation. It's hard to judge his ability from one game, though. His play is pretty sloppy, relying on his speed and muscles to get results. And there's no question that

he's got both of those. Probably channels a lot of his frustrations into the gym, besides the obvious attraction of being able to ogle other guys in t-shirts and shorts. So the question is: is he just poorly coached, or does he not learn well?

I start watching the other players. Only one of the safeties really stands out, but again, he's got lots of raw talent and awareness on the field. I remember how Dev used to play corner, how that anticipation and understanding is what's serving him well at linebacker. The plays these kids are running are really basic, which is funny because generally the kids at small liberal arts colleges are pretty smart. Your average Cobblestone College doesn't have athletic scholarships to admit kids who don't meet the academic standards. Maybe they're just not interested in learning football.

The defense gets a stop, and comes to the bench. I keep filming the game, but watch King on the bench. He jokes with teammates, but quietly, while they laugh boisterously. He takes water from a cooler, and then sits apart from the rest of the team and stares at the field. That little slump to the shoulders, the hunched-over back, it's all telling—if you're looking for it. I want to go pat him on the shoulder and tell him it'll be okay, but I can't.

Maybe if he'd answered my e-mail, it'd be different. But it's been two days, and the silence feels to me like a kid who panicked, who sent the e-mail on the spur of the moment, and when someone responded, when someone reached out to him, he shrank back. On the way here, I replayed the last two sentences of his e-mail in my head. *Maybe someday...maybe someday.* Clearly, that 'someday' is not now.

So why am I here, four hours out of my way, taking film that I'll maybe show one of the other coaches before it gets filed in the archives and never looked at again? I've been asking myself that all afternoon. I don't know. All I know is, there's something sad and yet reassuring about watching him hunched over on the bench. I know intellectually that there are other gay football players, but

watching one in the flesh makes it more real, and that makes me feel like Dev isn't alone.

The other students in the section are really friendly, even before they find out I'm a scout. They try to figure out who I'm watching, and a couple of them know enough about football to make good guesses. It helps pass the time while Cobblestone is getting demolished by River Heights University, which the students tell me is about half an hour up the road. They're better at football, but apparently their theater department sucks.

Driving to my next game, I munch on the onion rings the kids bought me on the way out and try to clear my head. There's got to be a hundred, two hundred kids like Vince King all over the country. Am I going to drive around and see all of them? What good would it do if I did?

A few years ago, I probably would've gone up to the kid anyway, just for the chance to right a wrong. Now, it would be hypocritical of me to drag someone else out of the closet. The best thing I can do, I guess, is continue to let Dev be a good role model. Answer the e-mails when they come in; eventually one will write back. And work on my own relationship.

When Aunt Carolyn mentioned sacrifice and compromise, last Thursday, the only things I could think of to sacrifice would be my cock or my pushy-fag attitude. I'm sort of attached to both of them. I know there's got to be something we—I—can do, if only I could figure out how. It has to be me; Dev still reverts to being a son when he's around his father. But this morning, I realized that there is someone else I can ask for help.

I've been putting off that phone call until after the first game. Now I figure I'll wait 'til after the second game.

This game, the one I have to watch for work, is crammed full, forty or fifty thousand people in the huge stadium. Even though the dry fall air, cool and crisp, doesn't carry scents well, I still have to wade through thousands of scents, flashing my Dragons credentials to get to the press area. Neutra-Scent tissues appear and

disappear in the crowd, white against the noses of people who don't like the more discreet perfume sticks. The specks of white are like static in the black and gold of the home team all over the stands. I head for the small island of neutral beige and light blue where the press sit.

Nobody here is impressed by a young scout from a pro team; there are five others here that I see. For the three hours of the game, my mind is on automatic, making notes about the four players on my list and capturing significant plays. We'll have the film at our facility by Monday, but recording on my own allows me to watch my players even when they're not the focus of the play. I keep them in my viewfinder, as discreetly as possible so the other scouts won't see who we're interested in. I wonder if any of those four are gay. Or any of the other hundred kids on the sidelines, the young pronghorn or the leopard cheerleader he's hitting on; the pair of rabbits talking and practicing kicking motions; the big wolf sitting alone on the end of the bench in a posture remarkably similar to Vince King's.

Only the beer vendor and the chicken sandwich lady talk to me, and then only at halftime, so I have a lot of time to think about things like that. When the game's over, I find a local coffee shop and sit there to review some of the footage while it's fresh in my mind. It's good to do that right away, and also it lets the traffic die down. Today, it also helps me rest my paw from about five hours of filming. The warmth of the vanilla latte helps my fingers relax and feel better, even through the cast.

When I'm done, after forty-five minutes of fast-forwarding, I take another five to look out at the fall landscape, the thicker-furred students walking around in their winter molt, the others walking around in coats. Most of the leaves here have dropped, and the ones that haven't have turned brown, though there are some yellow and red ones scattered through the foliage. Around me, kids are working on laptops, poring over textbooks, talking about classes. A brown rat talks excitedly to her boyfriend about

going home for Thanksgiving.

I didn't go home last year, pleading work—and it is a busy time of year—but really I was still mad about the shit my parents pulled in the spring. Dev paid my college bills, and I'm over that, more or less—after all, I conclusively proved them wrong by being a success with the Dragons. Still, I hadn't planned on going home this year either. Not like they've tried to talk me into it, not very hard. It feels like neither of us sees the point.

I wonder what Aunt Carolyn's doing for Thanksgiving, while I shut down the computer and stow the video camera. Once I'm outside, I take out my phone.

"Hi, Father," I say when he answers.

We go through a bit of small talk before he says, "I recognized your football player the other day, on TV."

"Right." The memory of a voicemail message flits across my mind. I wonder whether he means the press conference or the Today Show. Doesn't matter, really. "Sorry I never called back. It's been a little crazy."

"I've been following some of it. Doesn't look like they've lynched him yet."

Good old Father. "No, he seems to be doing okay with the team. They're mostly concerned about how he plays football."

"That's good. He's been doing pretty well. Might even keep the starting job once Mitchell comes back."

"We're hoping."

"Must be a relief for you."

I think about that for a moment before answering. "It is. I mean, it was so stressful for him, and now that the world didn't end, he realizes he'll survive."

"When you think about it," he says, "it's not really worse than Hinkel, last year."

"That's the one who was cheating on his mistress?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks for not bringing up Yates." That's the stag from the

Boxers who paid someone to kill his girlfriend.

He snorts. “He hasn’t mentioned you in any of the articles yet.”

“No.” A breeze ruffles through my fur with a little chill. “We decided it’d be better for me to keep a low profile.”

“So I can’t tell the guys at the office that my son is the one dating this famous football player?”

“Would you?”

“Maybe Dice. He’s gay.”

“Oh, good, so you do have gay friends.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call him a friend, exactly. We work together.”

I roll my eyes. “But you wouldn’t tell any of your friends.”

“Can I?”

“No.”

He sounds amused. “Okay, then, I won’t.”

I sigh, trying to come up with a way to ask what I want to ask. The silence stretches on, and he lets it, waiting for me to continue. Finally, I say, “How’s Mother?”

“She’s fine.” The answer comes so quickly I know it’s automatic. He pauses. “She and Janice Carter won second place at the bridge tournament last month.”

Around the stadium, the mass of headlights is thinning out. I’ll be able to go soon. “Don’t you usually play with her?”

“Janice has been playing more. Carolyn called. She said she saw you?”

For a moment, I wish I’d been able to listen in on that conversation. I try to imagine Carolyn talking to my father about me and Dev. “We had a nice dinner.”

“She told me you’re having some trouble with your boyfriend’s family.”

“Kind of like your sister did.”

He barks a short laugh. I feel a quick flutter of triumph at having surprised him. “I hardly think Marina’s situation is comparable. She ran off with a fennec who claimed to be a carpet merchant but who never actually produced any carpets. We think

he was an arms dealer."

"Seriously?"

There's a pouring sound, and then he drinks. "No. So I gather they objected to their son dating a fox?"

"It's the big ears," I say, and despite myself, I smile. "Yeah, his father wasn't too thrilled about me." I turn my left paw around, looking at the cast.

"So why does that bother you?"

It takes me a second to sift through all the layers of that question. I come up with four or five answers, finally settling on the simplest and truest one. "It bothers him."

He doesn't answer right away, taking a drink first. "That's unfortunate."

"I was wondering..." My left paw suffers a small twinge. I shake it. "What are you guys doing for Thanksgiving?"

"The usual. Dinner. Maybe some family."

He leaves it there, letting me give the explanation in my own time. "I was thinking...maybe Dev and I could come by."

As soon as I say it, I wish I could take back the question, because I already have a feeling about what his response is going to be. As the silence grows, I second-guess my feeling. He might be thinking of whether to agree, not how to phrase a rejection. He might surprise me.

But he doesn't. "I don't really think that's a good idea."

"Yeah, I didn't think so." The disappointment is colder than the breeze. "Well, thanks."

"You know, maybe if you'd come to Thanksgiving last year—"

"Oh, Christ."

He gets sharper. "Your mother was hurt."

"She didn't sound like it."

"Did you want her to burst into tears on the phone? Would that have made you feel better?"

There's always a point in conversations with my father where I start planning my escape route. "Is that what you think?"

“I don’t know, Wiley. I’m not sure what you’re thinking these days.”

It’s so hard to read his tone. It’s frustrating. “What I’m thinking right now is that I wish Dev and I could scrape together more than one supportive parent between the two of us.”

There’s a short silence. “Maybe if you tried scraping a little harder, you’d find more,” he says.

“Maybe if…” Maybe if Mom hadn’t run away the first time she met Dev. Maybe if they asked me about him, or gave any sign they cared. “Forget it.”

“So I should tell your mother not to expect you for Thanksgiving?”

I fold my ears down against the wind, over the earpiece of the phone. “I think she already knows.”

We leave it pretty much there. I got what I wanted to know: I can’t offer my home to Dev as an alternate family, even just for Thanksgiving. I’d thought I could put up with my parents for a holiday, but fifteen minutes on the phone with my father brought home again how foolish that was. I can’t feel comfortable with them; how is Dev supposed to?

It’s dark, and the roads are clear. It takes me only half an hour to get to my hotel room, where I hook up the phone to the charger and start to call Dev, and then I remember that I’d told him I’d call Gena. I’d tried yesterday and got no answer, so I dial again. It’s possible she’s ignoring my number, or forgot to put my name beside it. But I need to try one more time, for the sake of having at least one friend Dev and I can see together. She didn’t hide her discomfort, but she didn’t let it bother her, either. If she’s okay with me being in drag, she should be fine with me just being me.

We did talk the evening Fisher was injured, but it was a harried conversation, me just asking if she was okay and her replying with a tense, “yes, thanks.” I wouldn’t be surprised if she doesn’t answer again, on a Saturday night, but she picks up with a tired, “Hello.”

“It’s Lee,” I say, and start to say, “Dev’s Lee,” but she cuts me

off.

“I know. Sorry, just put the kids to bed. How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m fine. I just wanted to ask about Fisher. How’s the leg healing?”

She laughs. “He’s getting annoying, so I think it’s healing fine. The cast is itchy.”

“I know how that is,” I say, and just that little reminder makes my thumb itch inside its own cast. Dammit. “Well, good. Glad you guys are okay.”

“We’re fine. Looking forward to meeting you in regular clothes.”

My ears perk. “Sunday? You and Fisher are going to be there?”

“Of course. Didn’t Devlin tell you? Fisher told Gerrard to make sure he invited you because he wanted to see you again.”

“Ah. No, he didn’t tell me that.” I suspect that it wasn’t so much that Fisher wanted to see me as that he wanted the rest of the team to see me.

“I’m glad you’ll be there,” Gena said. “It sounds like it’s been rough for Devlin. The Today Show and all.”

“His parents aren’t exactly being helpful.” I leave it at that, and she doesn’t ask further.

The early flight I booked leaves me about six hours to sleep. I set the alarm and lie down, but I have trouble getting to sleep, though. I’m kind of excited, and not just because of the chance to get Gerrard Marvell’s autograph. This is a chance for me to make things right, at least a little bit. I screwed up with his family, but I won’t screw up with the team. I’ll make him proud.

11

Off The Field (Dev)

Gerrard lives in a nice little six-bedroom ranch-style house in a gated subdivision about a half hour outside of downtown Chevali. His wife, a shorter, energetic coyote, greets me at the door with a wide smile. “You’re Devlin, right? I’m Angela. Go on in. They’re all in the TV room…” Her ears go up as she glances behind me. “Oh. You must be…”

“Lee.” He steps forward and offers his paw. “Don’t worry. I’m used to not being noticed when Dev’s around.”

She takes his paw, still smiling. He’s probably the only guy here she can look down at. “I’m so glad you came,” she says. “Go on in. Or…if you don’t like football, the rest of us are out in the sun room.”

“I like football,” Lee says, his ears up, returning her smile. “But I definitely want a tour of this house. It looks gorgeous.”

“Thank you!” She beams, ushering us inside. I hand her the bottle of wine Lee made me bring, which she holds awkwardly as though not sure what it is.

“It’s wine,” I say.

Lee leans over. “I thought that perhaps some of you might not like beer.” He touches the label. “It’s a good chardonnay. Very light.”

She changes her grip, handling it more confidently. “Isn’t that lovely!”

Lee's tail brushes against my leg, wagging as he walks with me into the house. We both pause, looking around as Angela closes the door behind us. The place is huge. I think you could drop my parents' house into their living room without knocking down any of the walls. The art on the walls is all landscapes and abstracts, but the dirty pawmarks on the white walls and the scuffed floors make it feel like a home.

"You have cubs?" Lee asks Angela. "How old?"

"Two boys, eleven and eight." Her tail wags as she looks fondly toward the carpeted stairs. "Jaren and Mike. I'm sure you'll see them. They're running around in the yard now."

"Not captivated by the pre-game shows?" Lee murmurs. Angela's already on her way to the kitchen, pointing us across the vast living room to an open doorway. I can see Carson leaning on the back of a sofa, and hear Charm's booming voice. As we walk towards the room, Lee slows his steps to hang back behind me. I turn to him.

"You okay, doc?"

He straightens, takes a breath, and exhales. "Hell, yes. I'll make you proud."

I hide a smile, wondering how I'm going to balance being Dev the boyfriend with Dev the football player. But if I haven't reached a conclusion about that on the way over here, I'm certainly not going to in the next five seconds, so I just head on in, with Lee following me.

The living room is huge. Gerrard and Vonni are sitting on the long, wide couch watching the muted pre-game show on a sixty-inch or so TV, Carson behind them. Other players—no other SOs that I can see at first glance—stand in groups of two or three talking. Through the wide window, I glimpse a basketball court behind the house for a second before a massive form blocks it. Charm's bulk is impossible to mistake as he yells, "Gramps!"

He reaches us in three strides and lands a hearty smack on my shoulder. Then he spots Lee. "Hey! Mrs. Gramps?"

I wince. The whole room is turning to look at us, but I'm too busy freaking out about what might happen to recognize names or scents. My stomach tenses up, and I take a step toward Charm, feeling like when you slam on the brakes and throw your arm across the passenger to protect him from the impact. Lee's muzzle is frozen, his eyes sharp. But his ears don't flag. Slowly, he grins, and then he holds out a paw. "That's right. Lee Gramps. And I know you from such game-winning field goals as Millenport, 2006."

There's hardly anything he could've said that would've won Charm over more completely and immediately. The stallion lets out a surprised "Hah!" and claps Lee on the shoulder, nearly sending him flying into Carson. "Hell of a game! I was kickin' into the wind!"

I wonder how the hell Lee remembers a game between two teams he wasn't following at the time, and then I remember the film library he has access to. My stomach unclenches and my arms fall to my sides. This isn't going to be that bad. It's going to work.

I start to introduce Lee to Carson, but Charm takes over. "Hey! Spots! This here's Mrs. Gramps, name of Lee, he's pleased to meet ya."

"Mm-hmm," Carson says, extending a paw.

Lee gets to grasp it briefly. "You've been a real help—"

Charm sweeps Lee away. "Hey! Coach!" Gerrard turns his head. "Get over here, meet Mrs. Gramps!"

I shake my head. If anyone but Charm had called him that...but Lee doesn't seem to mind. Maybe he really doesn't mind, or maybe he's just acting for my benefit. I watch him shake Gerrard's paw, getting more words in this time. Whatever he says makes Gerrard's eyes flicker up to me as the coyote nods once.

"Hey there," a voice behind me says. I turn and see Fisher on one crutch, his leg in a bandage, free paw carrying a beer. He lifts it toward me. "Want one?"

"Fisher!" I start to clap him on the shoulder and then hesitate at

the sight of the crutch. Fisher grins and presses the beer into my paw. I sniff: it's domestic, but good domestic. "Are you s'posed to be walkin'?"

He grabs a beer from the table behind him, drops into a chair, and waves the crutch. "Aches like a mother," he growls. "But I can't lay in bed any more. God dammit, I had my bell rung half a dozen times, never missed a game. Fuckin' boar."

I see the play again, me dropping back, leaving Fisher alone to handle the boar and bear. My ears flush. "It shoulda been me. I shouldn'ta left you—"

He waves a paw. "Just glad it happened now and not ten years ago. Better me than you. You got a good long career ahead of ya."

"It's not the same without ya," I say, taking a drink. Nice: wheaty and crisp. My ears come back up, slowly. "Fuckin' boar."

"We could use a guy like him." Fisher looks around the room, his ears down, frowning.

"Really?" I glance around the room. Gerrard, Carson, Charm, Vonni, Norton. A couple guys from the D-line I know casually. Brick isn't here, though maybe he's coming later. Pike isn't here either. All of them good football players, talented, solid, but not over-aggressive. "I don't think Coach'd go for that."

"Nah, our penalty yards are down this year. But you guys did a nice job, after I got hit." Fisher gulps another slug of beer. "Maybe there's hope for the team yet. If guys know they can't push us around, that's huge."

"We don't let anyone push us around."

He shrugs. "There's 'you can take a hit' tough, and there's 'hit me and I'll destroy you' tough. We don't have that yet." His eyes sweep the room and return to me. "That ain't our personality. 'Cept you, sometimes."

I grin. "You pissed me off the one time. I already said I was sorry."

"Why? I attacked you, you hit back." He shifts his sling around.

"That's different. You're a friend."

“Don’t matter. Friend, family, whatever—you can’t let people get away with shit when you got something to prove. You do.”

I think about that. I’ve been pretty fired up this season, first trying to impress Lee, then worrying about the guys coming after me. Something to prove? Just that I’m a good football player. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Lots of these guys don’t. Gerrard? He just wants to play best he can.”

“He’s a coach on the field. That’s what we need.”

Again, Fisher’s eyes unfocus. “A Mike can be more’n that. When we won those championships, in Highbourne,” he says, “you saw? You remember Von Werner?”

“Big black wolf?”

He nods. “Mean son of a bitch. Punched a guy in a bar his rookie year. No big deal, then. Now it’d be all over the papers, or blogs, or whatever. Anyway, I remember, the semifinal, we played Yerba, they had this bear on the O-line, nasty blocker, just smashin’ open lanes for their running back.” I vaguely remember the game as he describes this. “Forget his name. First quarter, he ran all over our D-guys. So Werner tells the guys, let him through.”

I’m starting to remember this. I was in high school, still a cornerback, so a middle linebacker wouldn’t be one of my heroes, but this made highlight reels. “A wolf on a bear.”

“That’s what they told him. He said, let ’im through. And when Werner got that look in his eyes, you didn’t say no to him. So next play, they bounce off him, let him go through the line. He sees Werner, his eyes light up. You can see it on the replay. He charges forward. Their buck, behind him, thinks he’s got a lane. He’s been following this bear all season.”

Vonni’s drifted over, listening to us. Gerrard, several feet away, turns his ears in our direction. Charm is still talking to Lee, but the fox’s tall ears are similarly aimed toward Fisher. Conversation is slowing in the room.

“But Werner’d been watching the bear. Seen him on film all

season, watched him in the game. Bear's got fifty, seventy pounds on him, but he don't have good balance when he charges. Keeps his feet too close together. Just a little thing, but it's enough. Werner waits 'til the bear's lowered his head, and then he makes this sweet spin move, like he's dancin'. Grabs the bear's arm and pushes him down. Leaps over him and plants his helmet square in the buck's chest."

He notices the crowd and plays up, with motions of his paw. Beer comes close to sloshing out of the bottle. "The buck goes down like a sack o' bricks. The bear gets his face planted in the turf. He gets up madder'n ever. And Werner glares at him, and the bear glares back. So next play, they run the same thing again. And the guys let him through again, and he comes for Werner. Steel in his eyes, Werner usedta say.

"But Werner's ready, and this time he don't even touch the bear. He spins to the other side, dodges completely. The bear slows down, wondering where Werner is. Cause he wants to get him now. But Werner's already past him, grabbing the buck, and he throws him forward, to the ground, right into the bear. The bear's off balance. They go down together.

"They pass on the next down, so the bear's hanging back to protect. Werner leaves the coverage to his line, and he dives through to the bear."

We're all quiet. In the background, the TV goes mute. Gerrard's resigned half-smile tells me he's heard this story before, but his ears are still perked, listening intently. "And he flinches. The bear. Werner told me after the game, he said, that's when I knew I had the son of a bitch.

"He blocks him just above the knee. All legal. Sends him flying backwards, and then he stomps on his paw on his way to the QB. Like by accident, only not. Refs don't see it."

He surveys us. "And that's it for the bear. We don't even have to double-team him the rest of the game. Once in a while, the guys let Werner through, and he knocks him down again. Oh, the bear

runs off his mouth, but Werner's got his number." Teeth show in his smile. "Werner shoulda got MVP for that game. No way we win that without him castratin' that bear."

Gerrard coughs. "We need to get to the playoffs first. Then we can worry about taking out their star bully."

Carson nods, Charm says, "Fuck yeah!" and Norton echoes him. They break into smaller conversations, drifting apart again.

Lee leans in to Fisher. "The bear was Acherson. And he wasn't ever the same after that game." He starts to say more, but Charm grabs his shoulder.

"Hey, I want you to tell Vonni 'bout my kick," he says. "He never listens to me." And before Lee can protest, he's being pulled away.

I'm left with Fisher again, the two tigers in the room. "Hell of a story," I say. "You want me to be like that? Step on people's arms?"

He pokes my arm. "Playoff time, everything gets ramped up."

"Can't wait to see it." I've been in two playoff games, back in college. The memory is faint, though moments still stick out. I made two interceptions in our win. The next game, the one we lost, was really where the game started to move fast. Everyone was running in high gear. Seito, the white wolf quarterback on the opposing team, was deadly with his passes. He's now sitting on the bench in Highbourne. I don't know anyone else from that game who's in the pros.

The night with Lee afterwards in the hotel, that first time we had sex outside his apartment, that was in high gear, too. That night is crystal clear in my memory. Lee's hard to spot when I look for him, around the room, lost behind one massive body or another. Charm's kept him in his orbit; I finally see a calm Lee listening to Charm, who is gesturing expansively. The fox catches my eye and gives me a half-grin and a "what can you do?" flick of the ears.

"It'd be good for you," Fisher says. "You can't know what it's

like 'til you been there."

"Be good for all of us," I say. Gerrard's over by Lee now, and turns to add something to the conversation. It looks like Lee's met everyone. I relax, seeing him so fully relaxed. I was worried he'd be bristly or jittery, but there's nobody like Charm to get someone comfortable. I'd like to know how he does it. Maybe I should bring *him* to meet my parents.

"No, I mean it." There's something insistent in Fisher's voice, so I turn my attention to him. He's got a faraway look in his eyes and his ears are half-down. "Some guys, you don't know how they'll handle the playoffs. You'll do great, long as you keep your head in the game."

I'm aware of Lee, on the other side of the room. I stand straighter. "You don't have to worry about that."

"Maybe not," he says, and eyes me. "How's things with your folks?"

I feel my ears flush as I flatten them to my head. "Fine."

"Yeah, well, you should keep that in mind next time you go on TV."

"That stag—"

He cuts me off. "TV people are all assholes."

"Yeah, but this one—"

"What, didn't ask you the questions you wanted him to? They never do."

"But—"

"They never will."

I grumble. "Yeah, I won't be doing *his* show again."

He leans forward. "You read any of the articles people wrote about you? Seen what they done with your words?"

My fur prickles. "Lee read them. He said they were okay."

"Sure. He's smart, he don't wanna bother you. They were okay, most of 'em. But I'm sure you didn't mean half what they read into your words. Get used to it. Remember your media training."

"I did remember it. But they don't train you to talk about what

to do if you," I lower my voice, "come out in public."

"They don't tell you what to say after you stand up for a teammate gettin' gored in the leg, either," he says. "But you figured that out okay."

"They did tell me that," I remind him. "'What to say after a fight.' I know they didn't do it your rookie year."

"It was a lot shorter." He grins, showing fangs. "'We took care of business.' That's all we said after a fight. But I thought you did pretty good. Course, I was high on oxymorphone, so, y'know."

He points to his leg. Below the bandages, there's a metal brace, with a cloth area full of scrawled names. I gesture. "Want me to sign it?"

"Sure." He chuckles. "I can sell this on eBay when it comes off."

I find a pen and write, "Need you on the line, Dev," and then, because Vonni and Carson did it, I write my number next to it: "#57."

"I know your number," he says when I straighten.

I cap the pen, looking down at what I wrote. "Yeah, but your eBay buyer might not."

He laughs, and then my whiskers twitch as two large bodies enters the room. A moment later I get Pike's scent, then Kodi's. Pike calls out loud greetings, slapping paws as he walks in. I look at what I just wrote and feel a prickle of guilt, because Pike's sure to see that. Then I think, hell with him, he knows how things are. He knows we have to make adjustments with him on the line instead of Fisher. And the game's starting on TV, anyway, which brings people to the couches.

The early game is Crystal City at Highbourne. The Sabretooths have only lost once, a fluky 20-17 loss at Pelagia when their left tackle went out with an injury. Still, coming into the high plateau of Highbourne Field is always a tough game, and the Rocs are doing well this year. We get them in two more weeks, so they're the team we're watching more closely.

It'd be futile to try to get Lee away from Charm. I do manage to

grab a nearby seat, opting to sit next to Charm so the guys won't razz me about sitting with Lee. Vonni takes the seat nearer Lee, at the end of the couch. His whiskers twitch, and Lee's do too: a little bit of species familiarity between the two foxes. "How'd you break the paw?" he asks.

Lee shrugs. "Fell," he says, and that's that.

It's trippy at first watching a game rather than a series of isolated plays, not knowing how it's gonna come out, but I fall back into it easily enough. The Rocs get lucky early on with a turnover, turning it into a field goal, but the Sabres come right back with a field goal of their own. Neither team is in our division, so there's no unified rooting, but everyone gets into the game. Fisher, the former Roc, roots for Highbourne, and because Crystal City beat us to open the season, I root for Highbourne too.

Fisher also entertains us with stories of some of the veterans on both teams that he's played with. Gerrard knows a couple; the rest of us are too young. Lee stays quiet until about halfway through the second quarter, when he makes a comment about one of the rookies being busted for possession. "He should've been busted for stupidity," Lee says. "He told the officer—a wolf—that his twenty pot pellets were 'vitamin cannabis.'"

Vonni laughs; Fisher huffs. "Kids."

"I'd think a fox would be cleverer than that," I say.

"Yeah," Lee says. "Not on pot."

"You follow football pretty closely," Vonni says, turning to the other fox.

Lee hesitates. Probably wondering if it's okay to say that he works for a different team. The guys won't care, I know. I'm not the only one in the room who played for another team as recently as last year. "He's a college scout for Hilltown," I say. "The Dragons."

He gives me a sharp look, which I meet with a smile. Fortunately, Vonni reacts just as I'd thought he would. "Cool." The tall fox relaxes, letting his tail flop onto the couch as he calls down

to the other end. “Hey, Charm, don’t tell him about your groin injury.”

Charm, who looks one size too big for the couch, grunts. “It’s just sore. I hooked up with two bunnies at this club last night.”

Laughter fills the room. Lee leans back in his chair and catches my eye, giving a small twitch of his muzzle in a smile.

Vonni, watching the game, says offhandedly, “You sounded like a reporter there for a minute.”

Lee grins. “I wanted to be one. But this way I get to study football without having to ask stupid questions.”

He shrugs, and Fisher and Vonni both laugh. I recall the Today Show and clench my fists. I don’t think Lee notices, until a big play grabs everyone’s attention on the screen and he slips his paw over to squeeze mine, briefly. I don’t squeeze back, or try to, but I flick my tail tip against his, then away.

Vonni asks Lee if there are any Dragons rookies he particularly liked and helped draft, and Lee rattles off four or five names. One of them happens to be a wideout who played on special teams. Vonni saw him in action, and was impressed.

“That’s not all,” I say when he doesn’t show any sign of mentioning me.

He cuts me off. “You’re thinking of Novalo, but I didn’t scout him.” His eyes warn me not to say more.

“Oh. Right.” I’m genuinely puzzled. If anything, it makes *me* look worse to have relied on him. Is he worried about my standing with the team? But I let it go.

Vonni and Lee talk football with the sharpness of foxes. They end up arguing about one of the formations Crystal City uses, enough that Norton comes over to see what’s going on. To Vonni’s annoyance and my delight, the cheetah takes Lee’s side.

By halftime, I’m really relaxed. It’s going better than I could’ve hoped. The game is exciting, Lee is fitting in, and the guys are all loose. We stick around to watch the recaps of the other games in progress, then follow the smell of corn chips and pizza to the living

room or dining room, or, for all I know, Gerrard has a dedicated snacking room. It's a small room off the main one, which is to say it's only half as large as my apartment, but it's got a high glass ceiling and large glass windows looking out onto Gerrard's lawn and basketball court.

The wives who bothered to come have been hanging out here, sitting at small tables by the windows. Gena gives me a hug, then Angela introduces me and Lee to a shapely vixen, Vonni's wife, and a cheetah who's engaged to Norton.

Lee and I are there with Fisher and Gena when two coyote cubs burst in, both screaming with delight. The younger coyote is clutching a regulation football to his chest, dodging around guests as his older brother gives chase. Just as Angela calls, "No running!" the two of them come to a halt before Charm.

"You're big," the younger one says.

"He's the kicker," the older says, and shoves his brother in the shoulder.

Charm squats down, even then not getting close to their eye level. "I'm Charm," he says, and sticks out a hand.

"I'm Mike!" The younger coyote's paw disappears into Charm's huge mitt.

"Jaren," says the older cub, affecting a cool attitude even though his eyes are wide. When Charm holds his hand out, Jaren just slaps it.

They notice me and Fisher next, and come over for introductions. When I say my name, Jaren's muzzle wrinkles in concentration. His eyes light up at the same time Mike's do, but while his reaction is to grab at his younger brother, Mike's is a proud smile at having made a connection. "Oh!" he says. "Homo-ski!"

"Mike!" Jaren's ears flatten, his eyes wide. He drags his younger brother back a step, watching me warily.

Mike's high voice carries throughout the room. Angela comes hurrying over, but not before Lee, with a glance at me, drops to his

knees. I'm still processing the remark; it was delivered with such innocence and joy that I can't take it badly.

"Did you hear that at school?" Lee says, his large ears attentive to the cub.

Mike, catching his big brother's concern, just nods slowly, showing white in his eyes as well. Lee gives him an encouraging smile. "Do you know what it means?"

Angela's made it to the boys just as Mike shakes his head. "We talked about this," she says. "I'm so sorry. Michael Gary, you know better than to say that."

"It's okay," I manage to choke out. "He doesn't know."

Lee tilts his head to include Angela, still talking to Mike. The cub jerks back to listen to him as he starts. "Now, I'm sure your mom would say that you shouldn't use words you don't understand. You should ask her about them and if they're okay to say. I always went and asked my mom."

Angela's eyebrows lift, just a bit. "That's right," she says slowly. "Mikey, do you remember what we told you about that?"

"You didn't tell him about that," Jaren says. "You just talked about 'faggot.'"

Gerrard's come up behind Angela. "That's right, we did," he says, and the cubs both stiffen, ears and muzzles pointing straight up at their father. Lee stands, gracefully, making way for the older coyote. "And what did we say?"

Jaren says, "That it doesn't matter what else someone is as long as he's a good football player."

"And what do we call good football players?"

This time, Mike and Jaren answer in unison. "Sir."

"That's right. Now, I think maybe you boys better go upstairs."

I hold up a paw. "Don't make them leave on my account."

"They're being rambunctious," Angela says. "We told them they'd have to behave themselves."

The cubs clearly don't want to go upstairs, but they're not protesting. "They look okay now. It was a simple mistake," I say.

Angela and Gerrard look at each other. Gerrard shrugs, and looks sternly down at the cubs. “If we have to come over here again, it’ll be to take you upstairs.”

“Yes, sir,” they say.

“And thank Mister Miski.”

They turn to me. “Thank you, sir.”

Jaren runs over to talk to Carson, who I only now notice is watching with amusement, and Gerrard and Angela follow. But Mike pulls on Lee’s shirt until the fox drops to one knee again. “What is it?”

The little coyote puts his little muzzle up close to Lee’s ear. “Are you a football player?”

Lee smiles. “No, I just watch football.”

“He’s very good at watching football,” I put in.

Mike’s ears droop, just a bit. “I was hoping you play football, because you’re little and Jaren keeps telling me I’m too little to play football.”

“You’ll get bigger,” Lee tells him. “You’re only, what, eight?”

“That’s what Daddy says.” Mike glances over to where Gerrard is and then looks up at Dev, “I’m sorry I called you a homoski. Is it a bad thing?”

Lee grins, widely. “It’s not a good or bad thing,” he says, getting the cub’s attention. “It’s just a thing. But it’s not polite to call people that.”

“It’s like having a secret,” Mike says. He stares across the room at his brother and then whispers, “Can I be a homoski?”

Caught between choking and laughing, I end up coughing harshly. Lee makes a strangled sort of noise as well, and then says, “I think that’s another thing you have to be bigger to be. Ask your father when you’re older.”

“Aw,” Mike says. “How much older?”

“About ten years,” I mutter.

His big coyote ears catch that. “Ten *years*?”

“Maybe not that long.” Lee smiles and ruffles the fur between

his ears. “But it’ll be a while yet. You just go on thinking it’s a good thing. But don’t call anyone else that, okay? They don’t want you to tell their secret. If they want you to know, they’ll tell you.”

“Like you did.”

“Uh-huh.” Lee stands and puts his paws on his hips. “You want to learn something about playing football?”

Mike brightens immediately, jumping a few inches in the air. “Yes, *sir*!”

“Okay,” Lee says, “I’m gonna tell you a secret, so listen up.” He leans down and drops his voice to a stage whisper. Mike’s big ears strain toward him. “Being a good football player starts with your feet. You gotta make sure you keep your balance. Take strong, sure steps. Always think about where you’re putting your toes.”

Mike’s eyes are big and round. He nods vigorously. Lee’s expression is serious. “You got that?”

“Yes, sir!” Mike starts to run away, still carrying the football, and then he stops. He places one paw carefully in front of the other, flashing a smile back at Lee. His tongue sticks out of the side of his muzzle as he focuses on each step.

Lee sighs, watching him. “If only college kids were as easy to train.”

“He’s got a chance,” I say.

Lee’s ears flick. “Hm?”

“He’s got a chance,” I repeat. “He’s a good kid.”

“Ri-ight.” He lifts his unbroken paw to rub at his whiskers. “And that makes you sad?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. Mike steps carefully past Gerrard, who looks fondly down at him. “Gerrard’ll be a good teacher. He’ll probably coach his kids in high school, if he doesn’t end up coaching in the bigs.”

“That’s not always a good thing.” Lee names a two-time champion quarterback. “F’d up his kid’s career pretty badly, interfering in the high school team.”

“At least he cared enough. Gerrard’s smart, though. He won’t

mess up his kids."

"He'll probably be tough on 'em. Realistic about their chances. He'll make sure they get an education, so they have something to fall back on."

I look over to where Jaren is talking to Carson. It looks like he's telling the big leopard a football story. "He probably won't favor Jaren over Mike."

Lee grins. "Well, we don't know that. But for a pro career, I mean, come on. Who could resist Mike Marvell? Way better than Jaren Marvell. Jaren'll have to get a nickname."

I can't match his jokiness. Perversely, it just makes me feel blacker. "Jaren doesn't really want to play. Not compared to Mike."

"Mike's got it bad, all right," Lee agrees. "But maybe Jaren just needs someone to bring it out in him."

I wave a paw. "Maybe. It won't matter, though. He won't care what they want to do. He'll make sure they've got what they need to have the best chance to succeed."

"Now you sound like a coach."

"I sound like Gerrard."

"Same thing." Lee squints at me. His ears are still up, but the corners of his mouth have straightened out, the lift gone from his smile. "And if Mike brings home a boyfriend one day, how do you think Gerrard'll take it?"

"Lion Christ," I say. "What does *that* mean? He'll make it work somehow."

"Right," Lee says. "That's what families do. Just some do it in different ways. You didn't get Gerrard as a dad. You got Mikhail. So we'll make it work."

Pike wanders over with a huge plate of chips, munching with loud chewing noises. Kodi's beside him and a step behind. I give the brown bear a smile, and he returns it briefly, then looks back down at the plate and grabs a huge mass of chips. Pike says, "Hey, you two, game's coming back. You guys coming?"

“I want some snacks,” Lee says. “Dev?”

I shake my head. I don’t feel hungry. I keep looking at Gerrard and his kids, at how he manages to be firm but fair. How he talked to them about his gay teammate. How it was no big deal.

Lee goes off to get snacks, and I follow Pike back to the TV room. Just outside, he hands the plate to Kodi. “Go on in,” he says, “I wanna talk to Dev a sec.” Kodi hesitates, then nods and walks on in.

The first thing I think is that Pike’s going to say something about what I wrote on Fisher’s cast. I get defensive, preparing my arguments about how he’s making me work harder, how Fisher’s still got two rings. “What’s up?”

He glances back at the sun room, and lowers his voice. “Hate to be rude…I mean, he’s a good-lookin’ guy and all, but...how do you do it?”

Startled out of my defensive stance, I laugh, shortly. “How...? You want a play-by-play?”

He laughs and raises his paws. “Whoa, no, dude. I mean, how do you know? I mean, I look at him, and I think, nice guy, probably has a cute vixen girlfriend or wife or something. I don’t think, I’d hit that.”

His voice isn’t low any more. I’m sure at least some people in the TV room can hear him. I shake my head. “I’m not even sure I know how it happened,” I say. “He’s the smart one.”

Pike raises his eyebrows. “Like, he tricked you into it?”

“No, no. I mean, he, uh, let me work my way through what I wanted.”

That doesn’t help. “But how’d you know you wanted it?”

“I...don’t even know. I didn’t until...” My gaze slides back to Lee, in the other room.

Pike gives up, with a chuckle. “Foxes, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “You have no idea.”

“I dunno, I guess it’s just in the wiring. But you’re a hell of a football player.”

I raise my eyebrows. That helps, a little, but football isn't the part of my life that I'm worried about. "Thanks. Look forward to bein' on the line with you."

"We're all in this together." He pauses at the doorway to the TV room. "And, y'know, looks like you're happy, so, whatever."

I punch him on the arm. "Thanks. Appreciate it."

He punches back and checks that none of the wives are in earshot. "I mean, hey, I've done girls in the ass before. Not so different. If that does it for you..."

"Jesus, stop talking and go watch the game," I tell him, with a smile to let him know he hasn't offended me.

He does, plopping down on the big couch next to Kodi. The brown bear offers him chips, and turns his head in my direction. His expression is kind of sad, and a little bit longing, maybe. Then Pike says, "Hey, lookit that!" and Kodi turns back to the TV.

When the season started, he, Pike, and I were all backups. Seeing me and Pike get starting spots while he's still a backup, that's gotta be hard. Especially Pike—I don't think I've seen him and Kodi apart more than a few times all year. I know they live near each other. I remember what it was like, wanting so badly to start. No wonder he's a little hunched over here, and even more quiet than usual. I think he's the only guy here who's not starting.

The second half's just about to kick off. I lean against the doorframe, surveying the room. Fisher and Gerrard sit back, offering their experienced perspective on the plays. The younger guys, Pike, Kodi, Norton, Vonni, and a couple of the linemen, all sit in bunches, chatting quietly or typing on their phones. It feels like we could be in a college dorm or a neighborhood get-together, with Fisher and Gerrard the older guys keeping an eye on the group.

The two of them are having a discussion about a pair of wideouts the Sabertooths had ten years ago, cheetahs who were determined to one-up each other all season for three years. Fisher likes one, Gerrard the other. I listen with a little interest, trying to

pick up the details they're tossing at each other. There are two chairs free, but I keep watching the game from where I am. I can hear Fisher and Gerrard, and see all the action.

Fox scent tickles my nose, with nacho cheese. "Hey. Got you something."

"I'm not hungry." But I turn anyway, to see the plate he's balancing on the paw in a cast: chips drizzled with cheese, with salsa next to them. He's got a beer in his other paw, a slight smile on his muzzle. The cheese smells pretty good. So I reach out and take one, then another. And his foxy smile broadens.

Getting food in me lets a little sun into my mood. I watch more of the game, especially the guy the Sabretooths have at my position—a young coyote, second year like me, terrific football player. All through the second half, though, even as I joke and join in the discussion, my mind is still on Gerrard and his family.

I remember Lee talking about "twisters," back at the scouting combine, college kids with real talent who just didn't have the right exposure or didn't quite make the cut. Kids who might've made the league if things'd turned out a little different for 'em. I feel like I'm twisting now between what is and what ought to be. Why couldn't I have had Gerrard as a dad, someone just as tough, but fair?

I look at him, sitting on the couch, and I laugh at myself. Never thought of him like that before. I can't imagine playing linebacker alongside my dad. Then again, I know all his tendencies. If he could play football, I bet he and I would be a good team. The Terrifying Tigers, maybe.

Lee would get a chuckle out of that. I search the room and spot him sitting with Charm again. He's gesturing at the TV with his broken paw. I know my father's been rough, but he never sent any of us to the hospital. He did sprain my wrist once, but, well, that wasn't him, it was when he was trying to teach me to block. He threw me down and I just landed wrong.

He thought I might be a tight end, but I didn't do so good at

that in high school. Switching to defense was a disappointment, but he's always been there to support me. I'm sure he'll come around on Lee, too. He has to.

I mean, everybody here likes my fox. Yeah, it's just a few select guys, but still. Lee's at his most charming, talking about football, and the guys aren't even a little tense any more. Even Pike, who kept his distance coming in, leans over to get his two cents in on something Lee says. He's a great fox. I get a bit of a lump in my throat, and chug some beer to cover it.

The Sabretooths win in a close one, 24-21, when the Rocs can't convert on fourth down from their own 45. We settle in for the second game, during which Angela brings out more substantial snacks: chicken skewers, cheese, and small sausages with chili. By this time, Lee's coaxed me into eating more, and even though I relax a bit, I can't fully shake the clouds.

The second game isn't as good as the first. It's 21-0 at the end of the first quarter, and we all lose interest quickly. I'm chatting with Fisher and Pike about techniques during halftime when I look over and see my fox at the center of attention, Gerrard just lifting his pen from the cast. They exchange a few words. Gerrard smiles. I get this happy but wistful feeling, and then Fisher says, "Dev? You hear that?" and I yank myself back to the conversation.

“Hey,” Pike calls to Gerrard. “You allowed to play hoops or is that just for the kids?”

Gerrard raises an eyebrow. “You any good?”

“Hell, no,” Pike gestures to the TV. “But it’s better’n this.”

“We got a soccer ball,” Gerrard says. “Less risk of injury.”

“Bullshit.” Vonni’s come over. “You see that guy who broke his leg last week?”

Gerrard scans the room. Alex and Carson are wandering over, too, ears perked. “Fine, fine. No contact, though.”

Pike laughs and walks out. Gerrard follows, pausing to say a couple words to Angela. Then Vonni grabs my arm. “Come on,” he says. “Can you play?”

I nod, turning to see if Lee wants to play. He’s looking at Fisher as he makes a shooting motion with his undamaged paw. “C’mon, Gramps,” Charm says, bumping me toward the door.

“Let me just see…” I gesture toward Lee.

“He’s got a busted paw.”

“He could still watch.”

“So he’ll come watch. C’mon, I don’t wanna get stuck with Pike on my team.”

I keep looking, but Lee doesn’t turn back my way. So I head out with Charm and Vonni. We pick up Carson and play some four on four against Pike, Kodi, Gerrard, and Norton.

It’s fun to see the guys doing something other than football. This is really like a game, not a job. Despite Gerrard’s barked warnings, Charm smacks into Norton, sending the cheetah sprawling. I hip-check Gerrard and make a total of one impressive shot. Pike, to our surprise, turns out to have a really nice shooting touch for a big polar bear. “I played in high school,” he says without any false modesty when he fakes out Vonni for a layup. The fox is pissed and demands the ball the next three times we go down the court. To his credit, he sinks it all three times.

After a few minutes, the coyote cubs come out and play ballboys. Lee stays in the house; the one time I jog up to the living room window, he’s not in there, and neither is Fisher. Then Charm says, “Checkin’ up on the missus?” and I run back to the court, switching teams with Gerrard specifically so I can school the stallion. He’s half a foot taller than me but has *no* moves. He just heaves the ball toward the basket whenever he gets it. I block his

shots twice, then he knocks me down, and Gerrard says that's enough.

When we get back in, panting and slapping each other on the back, Angela's talking in front of one of the paintings in the hallway to Lee, Fisher, Gena, Vonni's wife, and Norton's fiancée. Norton wraps his arm around his fiancée's shoulders as we go by and leans down to kiss her. Vonni and his vixen exchange smiles, and I catch Lee's eyes. He glances back outside, ears down, but when he looks back to me, they straighten.

As Pike and I walk back, I notice Kodi watching us. Feeling sympathetic, I take that chance to pull the brown bear aside. "Hey," I say.

He gives me a guarded look, hesitating as though he doesn't really want to talk to me. "Sorry," he says. "I wasn't staring."

I shake my head quickly. "Listen, don't worry. The guys here, they know how you play."

His guarded look changes to surprise. "Really?" His voice is low and gruff.

"Me and Pike do. I'm sure the coaches see it. If you don't get a starting spot here, you'll land somewhere good. You're young, you got plenty of years left."

"Oh. Thanks." He nods and smiles, small ears flicking.

I look up, trying to see if I've helped at all. "I hope you get your shot here. That'd be cool, right? You, me, and Pike all starting?"

"Yeah." He looks down at his paws, then back at me. "That'd be cool. Thanks."

We walk back together to the TV room, where the ladies, Fisher, and Lee join us. Kodi stands by the window, a little less uncomfortable than before, I think. Pike walks over to stand by him while Lee and I ignore the still-unexciting football game to talk to Gena. She's much more comfortable with my fox now, and chats happily about how her boys are doing in high school. Then I get pulled away to watch Charm and Norton arm-wrestle. Everyone expects Norton to win—kickers' strength is all in their

legs—but Charm surprises them all.

When I look back, Vonni and his wife are talking to Lee. His wife is a little taller than Lee, and Vonni towers over both of them, but they're all laughing and having a good time. Again, I get the vibe of a family reunion: meeting the new additions to the family, renewing old friendships. The thought pushes me to go spend the rest of the time talking to Fisher.

Pike and Kodi take off soon after the game, then Vonni, and then everyone's leaving. Lee and I say good-bye and thanks to Angela and Gerrard and the cubs, who have behaved enough to stay downstairs and who say "goodbye, sir," to both me and Lee.

I'm lost in thought on the way home. Lee would call it a "minor funk," if he mentioned it, which he doesn't. But his conversation is energetic, bright, and just a touch forced, so I know he notices. "Everyone was really nice. Charm's a kick."

"I'm glad you didn't kill him when he called you 'Mrs. Gramps.'"

"You can tell he doesn't mean anything by it."

"Did he tell you the wallet story?"

Lee laughs. "Right before he signed it."

I glance down at the black scrawls all over his cast. "Who else signed?"

"Everyone." Lee holds it up and grins. "Once Charm and Vonni started it. I didn't have to ask anyone but Gerrard. Even Fisher signed it." His ears flick down. "He seems resigned to his season being over. Probably his career."

I hadn't really thought much about that during the afternoon. "If I had two rings and his career, I'd be okay retiring too."

"I don't think he's okay with it. I think he's resigned to it. He still wants to play." He looks sideways at me. "I think you'll want to play for a while, too."

"Maybe."

He settles back in his seat, paw rubbing his cast. "Good story about the bear, Acheson."

“Huh?”

“The one Werner tackled. You know, when someone gets into your head like that, it’s tough to get him out.”

I think about the guys I’ve lined up against. “Couple running backs tried to get into my head. That boar. The stallion on the Chimaeras.”

“You’re good about not letting them get to you.” He stretches. “Too bad the second game was such a blowout.”

“You didn’t come out to play basketball.”

“Fisher asked me to stay with him, then Angela grabbed us for a tour. I’d rather have shot hoops with the guys, but I didn’t want Fisher to be lonely.” He lifts his right arm and mimes making a shot. “I didn’t hurt my shooting paw.”

“That must be what Gerrard was saying.” I curse myself as soon as I say that.

Sure enough, Lee’s ears go up, and his tone goes down. “Saying to whom?”

“I saw him say something to Angela right as we were leaving. But you know, it was nothing—”

Too late. His ears flatten. “Like, keep the gay fox occupied so he doesn’t try to come shoot hoops with us real guys?”

“Or, how about the two injured guys keep each other company? Some of those guys are big. You might’ve gotten hurt.”

“I wouldn’t have. I should’ve known when Angela specifically asked me to come on the tour.”

“You asked her to show you the house!”

“Like one of the girls. Is that what you told Gerrard I am?”

“What I said to Gerrard has nothing to do with it!”

He folds his arms. “So you have talked to him. About…us.”

“No! Not him.” Again, I curse my mouth for sprinting a step ahead of my brain.

“But other people?”

Damn it. “Not really. I mean, some of the guys told me they figured I was the, y’know, the…”

“The male in our relationship?” He huffs again. “It’s none of their business what we do in bed, or who does what to whom.”

“Then why are you so worked up about it?” He just points his long muzzle at the windshield and doesn’t answer. “Look,” I say finally. “It wasn’t like that. None of the guys said anything to me about you being a girl. I promise.”

It takes a second for his ears to come up. I feel him relax. I can’t say what’s different, just that the car doesn’t feel tense any more. “Did they ask about my paw?” he says. “Did you tell them I broke it on your huge cock?”

I want to respond to the joke, but I’m too distracted by the thought that the guys thought I might’ve done that to him, intentionally or not. “You going to come to practice tomorrow?”

“I need to go talk to that reporter.”

That snaps me out of my funk a little. “What about?”

“He called during the tour. He just wants to get together.”

I tighten my paws on the wheel. “You guys are friends now or what?”

“You don’t think I can handle him?”

“Of course you can handle him, but…”

“He won’t be trouble.” He brushes his whiskers. “He just wants to talk to your ex-girlfriend and maybe hit on her some more.”

“And then what?”

His eyes widen, and his ears come up. “I’ll tell him something about your past. Give him another exclusive quote or two. He writes a story, gets his rent check, generates some sympathy. Everybody wins. Maybe he tells Corcoran some stuff about how great you are.”

“How do you know he really knows Corcoran? What if he’s playing you?”

I’m looking at the road, but out of the corner of my eye, I see his patient expression. “I looked up his articles. He did an in-depth on the Firebirds a few years ago. Front-office access, quotes from everyone, Corcoran on down.”

“That doesn’t—”

“Six articles since then on the Firebirds, three featuring quotes from Corcoran. Two of them breaking news.” He sounds not too smug, but I grumble anyway. “I don’t know why his wife left him. Looked like he was on a pretty good track ’til the newspaper folded.”

Stopped at a red light two blocks from my place, I turn to him. “So that’s why you’re pretending you’re a girl.”

“That’s how he met me.” His tone and scent both get sharper.

“You just can’t leave things alone.” I shake my head.

He gets me right away, sharp blue eyes meeting mine. He lifts his broken paw, holds it up like evidence. “I wasn’t dressed like a girl.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“It’s completely different. I don’t really give a damn if the reporter likes me or not.”

His ears are flat. I grip the wheel more tightly. “The last time someone with a blog didn’t like me, I ended up coming out on national TV.”

“I didn’t say I don’t care if he likes *you*.”

Now his eyes are dancing, though his lips are still straight and serious. Goddamn him. The light’s green, so I pull out, but not before the asshole behind me honks. “Just be careful.”

He leans back. “I’m always careful.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Okay, you’re right.” He puts a paw on my thigh. “But I’ll handle the press better than Ogleby.”

“Lion Jesus, a blind bull with Tourette’s would do better than Ogleby. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Yeah.” He draws claws along my pants, lightly. “Maybe after the season, you might want to look around for a new agent.”

I take a moment to think about that, rounding a corner and pulling up to the garage of my building. “I dunno. Ogleby took a chance on me when I was a rookie. I can’t just dump him when

things get good."

"You absolutely can. You're gonna keep playing like a star, and you'll need someone who can represent you fairly. Ogleby's not that bad, but he's not the best you could have. Who represents Gerrard?"

"I...I don't know."

He shrugs as I pull to a stop. "Ask him." He looks out at the empty garage. "You want me to get out and come up in ten minutes?"

I hadn't thought about it at all, but now I do. I know I probably should have him come up separately. "Um...I don't know. I mean, I'm sure other people in the building have seen you, right? Maybe you moved in, or something. We won't make out in the elevator."

"It's your call."

We park. He gets out when I do, and waits. I think about it, then grasp his paw and pull him into the elevator with me.

He gives me a smile, a little bit startled. I squeeze his paw and then let it go. Nobody else gets in as we start moving up. My mind drifts back to the conversation about Ogleby. "It just feels disloyal," I say.

He knows exactly what I mean. "Look," he says, "are you still dating the first girl who slept with you? She gave you a chance, right? Wasn't it disloyal to dump her?"

"That's different."

"Course it is," he says. "But do you think that if you hadn't gotten a chance to play, hadn't become a hot property, that Ogleby wouldn't dump you in a second?"

I stare at the bank of numbers, watching them move up from 4 to 5, 5 to 6. "Doesn't mean I have to be like him."

"Well," he says, and then stops. "Okay. Point." He stands on tiptoe to kiss me on the cheek, as the door opens onto the sixth floor landing.

But inside, when he puts his arms around me and I feel the weight of the cast against my back, all the worries about how the

cast might be seen come back. Like with Fisher. I shouldn't have let him get hurt. I hold him against me, the light frame of him, like a captive bird. I murmur into his ear, "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," he says. "I won't fault you for being loyal to Ogleby. I'll fault him for not deserving it."

"No, I mean...for..."

His cast shifts against my lower back. He tenses. "Oh."

"I never said."

"You didn't have to."

He feels good against me, warm and wiry. My paws are rubbing his shoulders in that "I hope this shirt comes off soon" kind of way, but I'm not really thinking about sex. I mean, I'm hard, sure, but I always am whenever he's this close. But I'm not moving toward the bedroom or anything. I'm happy just to hold him for now. "I'm the one who pushed you to come home with me."

"Because it was important to you. I wanted to."

It'd be easy to be annoyed with him again: if it was so important to him, why didn't he try harder to make it work? If I were to ask him, I know what he'd say: that that's how he is, and he doesn't know why he does it sometimes. For better or worse, that's the fox I'm in love with. I can't change that any more than I could choose new parents.

"I guess we can try again. In a few months."

He rests his muzzle against my chest. "I didn't think I'd be invited for Thanskgiving."

"I'm not sure I am."

"You can go back as long as I'm not with you."

I think about that. I'm sure he's right. Hell, I split up my life before I came out, didn't I? Went home for holidays, took other vacations with Lee. Would it be that difficult to keep doing it?

As if reading my mind, he goes on. "There's lots of cases where parents and kids get along just ignoring the whole 'gay' thing."

"I don't know if we're smart enough to do that."

He snorts against my chest. "Maybe you're too smart."

“I think that’s the first time anyone’s said that about my family.” I mouth his ear.

“I don’t believe that.”

His tail swishes slowly behind him, his head resting against my chest. We stand like that for a little longer, and then I say, “I kind of want a coffee. You want to go out?”

“Nah. You go ahead. Bring me back a vanilla latte or something.” He pushes his muzzle up along my neck and breathes, “I’ll stay here.”

“Okay.” I brush his ear with my nose and stroke a paw down his back, pulling his hips against mine. “Coffee Bean okay? Something warm and sweet?”

“Better than Starbucks,” he says. His lithe form rubs up against me, his tail curling around to brush my legs. He places my paws on his waist and holds them on his slender hips, a glint in his eye. “Remember. Skim.”

I kiss his nose, and squeeze, pushing my fingers beneath the waist of his pants to his fur. His arms hold me, one paw stroking the base of my tail. We stay pressed together like that, fingers on hips, warmth against warmth, until he murmurs against my throat, “So are you going to get something warm and sweet?”

I push my paws down his pants and whisper into one of his big black ears, “Fuck, yes.”

12

Exposure (Lee)

My tiger falls asleep quickly, sprawled out naked behind me, his body's curves shaped by the sheet and shadowed by the moonlight. Lying on my back, his arm comfortingly heavy on my chest, I watch him breathe and wonder why it's so hard for me to fall asleep. It's not just the warm memory of an hour before, though my rear and sheath still feel warm from his hardness inside me, his paw on my shaft, and our climax.

Not that that's not a nice memory, and worth staying awake over, even if I had to lie on my elbows so as not to put too much stress on my broken paw. It was good to reconnect in a way we hadn't since the visit to his folks. I trace a finger over his wrist, and he stirs.

I shouldn't be so hung up on his teammates knowing, or thinking they know, what we do in bed. I shouldn't be, but I am. Gerrard coddling me—okay, maybe it was just because of my broken thumb. But it doesn't feel that way. It feels like he was treating me like one of the wives.

Which shouldn't bother me, right? Really, it's just a question of like, dislike, and convenience. I like to get fucked. Dev likes to fuck. If it were the other way around, what would it matter? Doesn't mean I need to be shielded from basketball games. Or anything else, for that matter.

I let out a sigh, and as I do, Dev's arm tightens around me. He

is bigger, and stronger. No matter how it makes me look, or what it makes other people assume about me, I love that about him. But there's so much more I love him for than just his build and his muscles that I'm not sure why I'm focusing on this stupid little thing.

It's just me, I know that. It's nothing to do with Dev, not really. When I'm with him, it doesn't bother me. I want to lie here with him forever and not care about anyone else, about his team or his family or my family or my job. Who gives a damn what other people think our relationship is like, or should be like? We know what it is, and what it needs to be.

But the truth is, we don't live in a bubble. Tuesday morning I have to go back into the office. Tomorrow he has to go to practice. Sunday he'll be on TV in front of millions of people. Thanksgiving will be here before we know it, and then Christmas. Family holidays. Holidays he wants me to be part of, that I want badly to *be* part of.

It's silly that something that we both want can't work out. His father, though, I can't figure out a way around other than time. And will Dev be willing to wait for as long as it'll take? It might be five years, or ten, or twenty. It might be until his father dies. That's a long time to be miserable at every holiday.

It does no good to tell myself that Thanksgiving is a month away. I can feel the approach of the holidays, and the years following them, one after the other, so inexorable that the possibility of change feels as remote as the moon. I might as well ask Dev to turn his stripes vertical. I close my eyes and listen to his breathing, and press back against him until I feel his breath on my cheek. With his arm across my chest, I feel safe enough to let those other thoughts go, for now.

We grab breakfast at the Coffee Bean again, since I'm already dressed in drag to go see Kinnel, which Dev has not quite given up on trying to talk me out of. "I still wish you'd just leave it alone," he mutters as we're waiting for our drinks, though we both keep

smiling at the heavily-pierced lemur, who's making the drinks again.

"I'll be fine," I murmur back. Truthfully, I'm looking forward to seeing him again. "Can I give him a quote like 'I can't wait to see my sexy boyfriend again'?"

He snorts. "How about 'My ex-boyfriend says I can't talk to you any more'?"

The lemur signals that our drinks are ready. We walk over. "If you want to hear what Corcoran's thinking—"

"I don't think he really does know him."

"You have to be patient. These things take time," I say as we pick up our drinks.

"Good to have a gal around to give you relationship advice, eh?" The lemur points to our drinks. "Skim vanilla latte, double-shot latte."

Dev takes his double-shot. "Sometimes I give her relationship advice," he says.

The lemur laughs. "Awesome," he says.

"And then," I add, "I do the opposite."

The barista just shakes his head. "Appreciate the gay best friend, even if he is a football player. He's a cool dude."

"Thanks," Dev says, with a glare at me. But the flick of his tail is playful, not really angry.

So I assure the lemur that I do appreciate my big gay tiger, in a low enough voice that I don't draw the attention of anyone else in the coffee shop. It's worth it just to see Dev get all growly and flustered, leading me to ask him, in the car, "Are you not my big gay tiger?"

He snorts. "Where am I dropping you?"

"Richmont Hotel. They've got wireless in the lobby, so I can log in to work. He's meeting me for lunch, and I'll get a cab to the airport in the afternoon."

He's quiet for a few blocks, and then says, "Next Monday, if we get the day off..."

"You'll beat Gateway."

"If we get the day off," he continues, "let's do something, just you and me."

I smile and rest a paw on his thigh. "That sounds really nice."

At the hotel, he even leans over and kisses me. No tongue, just a nice muzzle bump, but it makes me feel warm. Getting out, waving good-bye, I feel the usual pang of knowing it'll be a week before I see him again. This time, I also feel a touch of amusement. I think he's jealous of Kinnel.

Silly tiger. I set up in the hotel lobby, in a corner out of sight of the registration desk. The Richmont is a posh enough place that I probably don't need to worry about anyone asking what I'm doing, as nicely as I'm dressed. It's not so posh that the staff all keep mental track of the guests, either, so I think I'll be okay as long as I look like I belong there.

Filing the reports on the weekend games makes me think of Vince King, at Cobblestone. So when my work reports are all in and the player profiles updated, I check Dev's e-mail again. Nothing from him. There're another few e-mails from gay athletes in high school and college, but no football players. Their notes aren't any less touching, but they're less desperate. Lacrosse and swimming don't exactly have the same kind of hyper-masculine culture that football does that forces gay kids to keep their identity secret.

Then again, I just spent an afternoon with a bunch of pro players, introduced as Dev's boyfriend, and they even signed my cast. I've put a light glove over it, so I don't have to explain the signatures to the reporter, but I can still feel their warmth. A hand-picked selection of players, I remind myself, who were all fine with our relationship. Not necessarily indicative of the league as a whole.

But the league as a whole has not really had a strong reaction. Several of the gay webzines and foundations have trumpeted this as a huge deal, but on the whole, the sports world has already

moved on from it. Most of the sports sites are showing a front-page story about an otter who plays for Peco, caught with a gun after a shooting at a nightclub not three hours after the end of their game yesterday.

Sadly, that event generates less ink than Dev's coming-out did. There's a sidebar about Dev, or at least tangentially about him: "When Will The Next Gay Football Player Come Out?" It's a puff piece, nothing more than the question expanded to a thousand words.

If I knew any other gay football players, I might be able to answer it. My best guess is that they're all still waiting to see what happens in the long run, or at least the medium run. Will Dev be a target, knocked out of a game, like Alex thinks he will? Will it really be not a big deal? Will he lose endorsements or gain them?

I think he's going to get more. I almost want him to give me Ogleby's number so I can help. Almost.

I don't get all the way through the e-mail queue before Kinnel shows up, five minutes early. I close the laptop and stow it in my carry-on, standing to meet him.

He's dressed up for the occasion, in a nice pink shirt, pressed, open to show off his chest ruff. His almost-white slacks would look like they came from a leisure suit if they were one shade whiter, but as it is, they look pretty nice. And he's bathed recently, too. Very different from when I saw him at the press conference. Wouldn't kick him out of church on Sunday, as my mother used to say.

"Miss White." He smiles and holds out a paw. "You're looking lovely."

I've worn an old rose dress, but of course, he hasn't seen it before. It accessorizes well with a silver necklace I have. "You're looking nice yourself," I say. "We sort of match."

He smiles toothily and jerks his thumb out the door. "The restaurant here's kind of pricey for an unemployed blogger, but there's a great sandwich joint across the street. It's, ah, it might not

be a great place for a lady, but if you're willin'..."

I smile, and gesture for him to go on. "It's fine."

He takes me to "Between The Sheets," a place that brags "we'll put anything you want between two slices," and "wrap any bread around your meat," shockingly racy for Chevali. I'd expect it in Port City, maybe, down in Cottage Hill, or in the gay block of Hilltown, but two blocks from the Richmont in conservative downtown Chevali?

Kinnel orders his favorite, the Hot Summer Night—turkey on toast—and recommends either that or the "Chicks of the Sea" (tuna salad) to me. I take the tuna and we sit down in a corner booth with our sandwiches. He offers to pick up the check, but I decline, as much because I don't want to be obliged to him as because I know he can't really afford it.

"So what brings you to Chevali?" he starts with. He's being conversational, but I can hear the reporter's edge beneath it. Something's different about him, too. He's holding his ears up higher, and his smile is brighter.

"I travel a lot for work," I say. "Don't always get my schedule very far in advance. I happened to be sent down here this week, and no, I'm not going to discuss my job."

He flashes me a wide grin and takes another bite, talking with his mouth full. "Fair enough. I appreciate you making time for me."

"No problem." I tap my fingers on the table, wishing I'd ordered something that was easier to eat in a ladylike manner. Digging in with fork and knife would be too over the top, so I pick the sandwich up as delicately as I can with my one good paw. "How did the quote I gave you work?"

"Sold an article," he says through another bite. "One. They want to know if I can get any more quotes."

I wait 'til I've finished swallowing the first bite of tuna, which is not bad, and then I say, "I can see about trying."

"I do want to tell your story, too" he says.

“I appreciate that. But I still don’t think I’m very interesting.”

His smile stretches back. “I beg to differ,” he says. “I really hope you’ll let me write it up.”

“Maybe someday.” The tuna becomes harder to manage the longer I hold it, as the drippy mayonnaise soaks into the bread. I take another bite.

He tears another bite out of his own sandwich. “How’d you hurt your paw?”

“Biking.” That lie is automatic now.

He accepts it as easily as the others. “What did you study in college?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Me?”

“How can I convince you yer story’s worthwhile ’less I know more about ya? I bet it was something like journalism or English,” he goes on. He holds his sandwich up in one paw, waiting.

“Um.” I take a slow bite, giving myself time to decide not to add to my many lies to Kinnel. I swallow. “English.”

“Knew it.” He takes another huge bite, talking with his mouth full. “I was journalism. Can always tell the type.”

“Surely you don’t think that’s interesting enough to publish?”

“It’s but a piece of the puzzle.” He starts to ask another question, but I cut him off.

“What did Cimarine study?”

That takes some of his brightness. He flicks his ears, leaving them lower. “Business.”

“Interesting.” I take a bite. I don’t really know how, but I want him to think I think it is. “How’s a business gal come to marry a sports beat writer?”

“How’s a vixen majoring in English come to date a gay jock for three years?” he parries.

I remember that warm spring evening in April. “To tell you the truth, Mister Kinnel—”

“Hal.”

“—I don’t really understand it myself.”

“See,” he says, “there’s gotta be something special about you. Something he noticed and you’re not telling me.”

“We were able to talk together, about just about anything,” I say. “We just click. That’s not so unusual.”

“And yet,” he waves his sandwich at me, “he couldn’t talk to you about being gay.”

Damn. “That was different. It would have affected our relationship.” He raises an eyebrow, whiskers flaring out from his narrow muzzle. “Yes, I know. He’s considerate. He wanted to spare me until he was sure.”

“Sure enough to have had a boyfriend for a year and a half?”

I have to take another bite of my sandwich to stall. It gives me time to come up with the answer. “A lot of young people have trouble assuming a gay identity. It can be just ‘something they do’ for years before they acknowledge who they are.”

“Mm.” He rubs his muzzle, finishing his sandwich. “And what triggers that change?”

“It could be a lot of things—”

“What do you think it was for Miski?”

My tuna salad is dripping along my glove. I lick at it to clean it up. “Love.”

“For the boyfriend.”

I nod. “Love is a funny thing, as you know.”

“Well,” he says, “it comes and goes easier for some than others. You still love him, don’t you?”

“Yes.” It’s a relief to not have to lie. “And you still love Cimarine.”

“It comes and goes.” He taps his fingers together. “Does he still love you?”

“In his own way.” Which happens to be my favorite way.

“Maybe he’s just bi.”

He’s got kind of a jokey tone for a supposedly serious subject. My whiskers twitch. “He’s made his decision, Mister Kinnel.”

His eyebrows lower at the formal name, but he doesn’t say

anything about it this time. He watches me finish my sandwich and lick the drips from my fingers. “Do you get the dreams?”

“The what?”

His ears are down. “Dreams. That you’re still together. You wake up and for a moment, you still think…” His sigh feels familiar to me. I try to think of who it reminds me of while I’m composing my answer.

“No.” I have to be truthful. “But I never remember my dreams.”

“Think about the things you did wrong? Think about what you might have done differently?”

I nod. “Though I couldn’t really have done much different. Could you?”

He rubs the side of his muzzle. “I dunno. Not without *being* someone different.”

“So you shouldn’t dwell on it.” His turn to despondency puzzles me. He was so cheerful when we met. Could the mere mention of Cimarine make him depressed again? The last thing he said goes back through my head, the emphasis on “being,” the existential angst of it, and I realize who he reminds me of in this moment: Brian, my former best friend, the actor who wasn’t above a little drama play like this to draw guilty reactions out of me.

So I tell him what I told Brian, months ago. “You should look to your future.”

Now he gives me a smile. “It’s good to talk to someone who knows.” His ears perk up.

I smile back at him. That reaction’s artificial, too. He’s not as good an actor as Brian. He’s trying to get me to admit something. That means he knows something about me. “You’re happier today. Is it just the article you sold?”

“It shows?” He chuckles. I hear the soft thump of his tail wagging against the booth. “No, apart from just being in the company of a lovely vixen again, it’s the article I’m hoping to sell. See, when I heard Miski talking about his boyfriend for a year and a half, I thought maybe it was someone he knew in college.”

My fur prickles. I will it to stay down, to not show on the back of my neck. “You think so?”

“I do now.” He rests both paws on the table, leaning forward. “So I did some checkin’ around at Forester. Coach pointed me to the guys Miski hung out with. Took a while to track ’em down, but y’know, I got nothin’ else to do.”

His eyes are shining now. I can see why he made a good reporter. It’s not putting me any more at ease. “Did you find anything?”

“I think I did.” He tilts his head. “Does the name Randall Johannsen sound familiar?”

It doesn’t, immediately. Then it clicks. “Randy? Dev’s college roommate?”

He nods. “You know him?”

“I met him, once or twice. You think *he’s* the boyfriend?” I pretend to mull it over. It’s a last-ditch attempt to mislead him. “They were roommates, so I guess…”

He holds up a paw. “Not quite. Mister Johannsen is a factory worker in Crescent Bay, a little north of Aventira. Married, one kid. But I talked to him for about an hour this weekend.”

He wasn’t fooled. Nobody talking to Randy could think he was gay, really. “How is Randy, anyway?”

Kinnel’s dusty-brown muzzle creases with a smile. “He remembers you, too. Only he didn’t think your last name was White. And he kept talking about how…well-proportioned you were.” His smile widens. “Sent me a pic he had of you and Miski. Not to be rude, but…it looks like you might’ve been exaggeratin’ your figure just a bit, back then.”

My throat’s dry. I didn’t think Randy would’ve kept that picture. I tried so hard to stay off camera, but with cell phones and digital cameras, you just can’t.

“Nice pic, though,” Hal says. “You look real happy, pretty dress. Miski looks happy too, but all Mister Johannsen remembered was your bosom. Football players, huh? Hate it when people turn out to

be stereotypes."

The way he says the last word, looking at me, leaves no doubt in my mind. He's playing with me, and he's happy because he knows something about me. It wouldn't have taken him long to find out there was no 'Lee White' at Forester. I make the decision quickly, dropping into my normal voice. "Like the gay guy who cross-dresses?"

The swift fox's eyes widen. He searches my face. I stay expressionless. "Actually," he says, slowly, "from what I hear, most gay guys aren't cross-dressers. I'd'a guessed who I was dealin' with sooner if they were."

"I didn't expect you to do research into Dev's past."

"I'm a good reporter." He taps the tabletop. "I was pissed at first. Didn't want to talk to you again, thought about sending a nasty note." He holds up a paw. "I mean, I thought you were a gal I could talk to, who'd been through the same things. Started writing a note, actually, but as I was writin' it, I thought, hey, ain't so different really, is it? You didn't get dumped, but he's not paradin' you out in public."

"It's my decision." He raises his eyebrows. I lower mine. "I just...don't want the media attention."

"Ah. So much for tellin' your story." He rubs the side of his muzzle. "I could write it up all anonymous. 'Miski's boyfriend shuns spotlight.'"

I shake my head. "I don't think so."

"Come on," he says. "I'm as good at writin' as research. Trust me, there'll be nothin' to come back to you."

"Not right now." I sigh. "There's a lot of stuff going on."

His eyes flick down. I realize I'm rubbing the cast. "Still hurt?"

I stop. "It comes and goes."

He grins, then looks to the side as a couple skunks pause near our table. The taller one gestures to the next booth and asks us, "'Scuse me, you mind if we sit here?"

"Go ahead." Kinnel waves them on. "Nice of them to ask," he

says as they sit.

Skunk smell tickles my nose. “Considerate.” I keep my voice very low. The smell’s not so bad, and we foxes aren’t exactly subtly scented.

“How did you meet?”

I shake my head again. “That’s…not a good story. Even anonymous.”

“Well, hell.” He exhales, ears flattening. “So all I can write is that Miski’s boyfriend is a fox he met in college who goes around in drag?”

I reach back to smooth down the fur on the back of my neck. “I’d really appreciate it if you wouldn’t,” I say, putting on my female voice again. “As a favor to a lady?”

“You’re no lady.” He glares at me. I nod my head back to the skunks at the booth behind me, and he lowers his voice. “I did all that research.”

“I can’t stop you,” I say. “But I’d really prefer you didn’t.”

“All right, then.” He pauses, then starts to slide out of the booth. “Pleasure meeting ya. Keep me in mind when you’re ready to do more.”

“Wait.” He stops, ears flicking back at me. “Don’t you want a quote from Dev about the upcoming game?”

He considers that, dusky-furred muzzle tilted slightly to one side. “If somethin’ interesting happens in the game, let me know.”

Before he can go again, I say, “You could talk to me about Cimarine.”

“Doesn’t seem fair,” he says slowly, “if you ain’t gonna reciprocate.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t. Just that you can’t print it.” When he doesn’t respond, I press. “So that’s all I was? A story?”

“I got bills to pay.” His ears flick. “Don’t reckon I owe you anything at all.”

“Got lots of other friends, have you?” I sit back.

He tilts his muzzle, a grin spreading across it. “Hurt your

feelings? Maybe you're more of a lady than I thought."

The skunks behind us have gone quiet; though I'm pretty sure our voices are too low to make out words, the iciness of this exchange is unmistakable in tone. "Fine." I curl my tail up into my lap. "Go."

Somewhat to my surprise, he does.

Part IV

13

Extra Points (Dev)

I'm a little apprehensive, walking into the complex for Monday's practice, waiting to hear what the guys are going to say about Lee. Not too worried, really. I just don't know what to expect.

It looks like the offense is already out for their practice. Only the defense is in the locker room, plus Charm. Which is a little weird, because usually the kickers hang out in the video room when the rest of us are practicing, but he's clearly waiting for me. "Hey, Gramps," he yells as I walk in, and everybody turns. It's also a little weird that they're all there already. I mean, I'm half an hour early, but everyone else got here ahead of me. I kick myself mentally, remind myself to get to practice an hour early, tomorrow.

A bunch of them are wearing white Ultimate Fit gear. There's a box in front of my locker that's been torn open already, shirts and shorts scattered nearby. "Thanks for the gear," Vonni says, running a paw down his shirt. "Feels good."

"No problem." I catch sight of Colin and Zillo on the other side of the room, bare-chested, holding their jerseys. "Help yourselves."

"Way ahead of you." Charm grins, decked out in the shirt and shorts and carrying two more pieces over his arm. The guys who aren't pulling on uniforms are dressed, their jerseys hanging loose off them. No pads today; we won't do a full-contact practice until

Friday before game day.

Even Gerrard is wearing one of the undershirts, his jersey slung over his arm. He jerks his head to my locker. “Get dressed and let’s get going.”

The rest of the guys drift a little closer as I walk over to the locker. Something’s up. I have that rookie feeling when everyone’s in on a joke that’s about to drop on me like a bucket of water over a frat house door. And when I get to my locker, the joke becomes clear.

My uniform is nowhere to be seen. Inside is an Ultimate Fit shirt, Ultimate Fit shorts—and a cheerleader’s outfit. I stare at it, not realizing right away what it is. Giggles and chuckles ripple around me, and then I remember the day over a year ago when all the rookies on the Dragons had to dress up in full suits for a practice.

The room breaks into laughter when I hold up the skirt. I catch Gerrard’s eye, but I don’t really need his confirmation, the smile and the gruff, “Let’s get on the field.” I know I’m going to be practicing in the skirt today. It’s like being a rookie all over again. In fact, the rookies are enjoying it even more than the rest of the guys. Especially the one we made carry our pads around all during the preseason.

But the guys all around are grinning at me, and not maliciously. Rookie hazing is an initiation to the team, a “gotta pay your dues” kind of thing. This, here, is kind of a “welcome back.” I guess it’s payback for all the media attention. It means the team is comfortable enough to joke around with me, that being gay is no big deal, not to the guys that matter. And it means I’m going to knock the hell out of anyone who gets in my way today, pads or no pads.

I’m just pulling on the skirt when Coach and Steez come out of his office, along with the other defensive coaches. Coach doesn’t crack a grin when he sees me. “Officially,” he says, “I see twenty-five guys in uniform. Closed practice today, no media. We got a lot

to work on, so let's get to it. Let's get out there and cheer our asses off."

Everyone cracks up. I grin and say, "Hey, where's my pom-poms?"

Steez pokes me right in the Firebirds logo. I realize I've never seen the old cougar laugh before. "Head in the game, Miski! Head not in pom-poms." For the rest of the practice, anytime one of the guys screws up, we yell, "Head out of pom-poms" at him.

Steez and Coach are setting up a bunch of new plays that have me coming up to the line more while Pike collapses the pocket. So I need to know not only how to work with Gerrard and Carson, knowing where they'll be, knowing what my responsibilities are in a coverage situation, but I also have to know what Pike's doing on any given play. Pike's got power, which will allow us to do some different things, but he's only in his third year. With Fisher, it was easy. He handled his man, he slid over to help with coverage when needed, and I didn't have to think.

I keep the cheerleader outfit on until I shower, letting the guys get pictures before I take it off. Coach wanders by and says, "Don't give those to the papers," and everyone promises. I get Charm to take one on my phone so I can send it to Lee later. He'll get a kick out of it.

After the shower, I try to talk to a couple of the guys about Lee. "Nice guy," Vonni says, but he won't say anything else. Carson I don't even bother trying to get to talk.

Gerrard just shrugs and says, "Worry about your assignments." He taps the new playbook pages in my book. "You got plenty to keep busy with."

Even though we had a good practice, the new formations and plays aren't second nature yet. I can't waste time focusing on this other crap. Everyone's cool, and we all have work to do.

I could move on to worrying about my family, but that worry has subsided to a dull ache in the background, like my toe injury from the commercial. Besides, Gateway is going to be on the field

on Sunday and I need to do a lot of things to be ready for them. When I talk to Lee, he reminds me to focus on the game, because the family isn't going to sort itself out in a week anyway. I tell him I know that and he says he knows I know.

To change the subject, I ask him how the talk with the reporter went, and he gives a little laugh and says he was full of surprises. "So is there going to be a story about my ex-girlfriend out on the blogs?" I ask him, annoyed that he's being vague about it.

"No," he says. "Nor about your boyfriend, either."

"Wait, what? You told him..."

"He already knew. He called Randy."

My throat closes up for a good fifteen seconds of terror. Lee's saying something else about how Kinnel's got a sharp nose, but I interrupt him in the middle of whatever it is when the terror gives way to fury. "So what the fuck? You just told this reporter that you're my boyfriend, and you expect him not to report it?"

"I trust him."

"You trust him. What did you promise him?"

"Nothing." He snaps it back. "I've been looking at the articles he wrote over the years. They're all nice, safe, and bland. Nothing controversial. He told me he interviewed a gay basketball player a while back. There's nothing like that in anything he wrote. He says he won't write the story."

"He's unemployed now," I point out. "Money talks."

"You weren't there, stud." Lee's voice crackles over the line. "I guess we'll see if I'm wrong in a week or so, right?"

"Hell of a gamble."

"I thought he could help us. It was worth the risk."

"You decided it was worth the risk."

"Yeah, and I'm the one who gets burned if it wasn't. Okay?"

"How do *you* get burned? I'm the one the press is going to be asking about this fox I'm with, this fox who works for another team, who's—"

"I'll get called too. And work. I could..."

I grumble. “You’d get some remarks here and there.”

“I could be fired.”

“For being gay?” I can’t believe that. But then he explains, and a lot of his stress over telling the guys at the party about his job makes more sense. “Shit. I’m sorry. Fox, you shoulda told me.”

“Didn’t want to worry you. And then at the party there wasn’t really time.”

“Still, I mean…”

“I didn’t think you’d be telling people I work for the Dragons. You haven’t been talking about me at all.”

“You could really be *fired?*”

He sighs. “That’s what Morty says.”

“Are you okay? Shit, I’d be freaking out.”

“You were in kind of the same situation. Except it worked out okay for you.” He laughs shortly. “If anyone in college had told me I’d be closeted at work, but my boyfriend would be out…”

“I’ll make sure no-one on the team tells anyone.”

“Maybe it’d be better not to make a big deal out of it.”

So then I tell him about the cheerleading outfit. Of course, he gets it right away, the rookie hazing part of it. He thinks it’s a great sign, and he wants to see pictures.

The next day, the guys all agree to keep Lee’s workplace to themselves. Charm, typically, says, “I already forgot where he works.” Nobody but Gerrard even asks why, and once I tell him that I’m asking people at Lee’s request, he understands pretty well.

That night, when I tell Lee that the guys are all gonna be cool, he perks up considerably. That gets me feeling pretty good, too, good enough that after we hang up I call home. Mom answers, but when she hears my voice, she just says monosyllabic answers.

The next night, she has more time. Things go well—she even asks about Lee’s paw—until I bring up that I want an apology from Dad, and she says he’s not ready to do that. I ask her if she thinks he’ll be ready by Thanksgiving, and she says she thinks it’ll be easier in person.

Which is just Dad's way of putting off the confrontation. He knows if I come home for Thanksgiving without Lee, I've already kind of given in. The flash of anger that accompanies this realization gives me a vision of myself spending Thanksgiving with Lee, just the two of us, with turkey and all the trimmings.

It's nice, until I picture my family eating Thanksgiving dinner without me. If I weren't home, my brother wouldn't understand why; my mother would put on her forced smile and look wistfully at my usual space from time to time; my father would bluster and pretend not to care. More than that, I'd miss it, the sitting around remembering past Thanksgivings, talking about relatives, catching up.

That second time, when I hang up the phone, it's Friday night and I'm standing in my apartment. I talked to Ogleby earlier that day: more interviews, but no more endorsement deals. He says it's just a matter of time, but I don't know. The reporters I've been talking to keep asking more and more about how I react to homophobia, and I can't help but link that back to my TV appearance. I try not to think about it too much, because it makes me feel a bit ill.

So I talk to Lee about anything but my family. I ask about his job; he's going back to Freestone this weekend and then he'll be out here Sunday night and Monday. Hopefully we'll win and have the day off. Lee gives me a few pointers on Gateway, I tell him some of the things we'd covered in our practice, and ask him for any more advice.

He says, "You've got it covered, I think. But you know, the more you can practice with Gerrard, the better."

"Well, duh," I say. "I could get that kind of advice from the newspaper."

"You mean the Internet." He chuckles. "Gerrard's used to running that unit, and you know the plays, but you need to figure out how he works. When he's going to come forward, when he's going to drop back. You can't diagram for every occurrence, so you

have to know how he plays. When you watch film, watch him."

I feel a stab of guilt. I don't want to say anything about Fisher, but I need to know that Lee doesn't blame me for it. "Is this because I let Fisher down?"

"That wasn't your fault." He sounds surprised. "Did someone say it was?"

"Nah. But if I hadn't left him alone—"

"Trust me, nobody's blaming you, not in the columns or in the locker room. The team paid your fine, didn't they? And the league fined the boar fifty."

"But we're supposed to look out for each other. If I'd been nearer, I coulda stopped the boar."

"Gena says Fisher's rehabbing well. He'll be back for the playoffs. At his age, he can use a few games off." Lee's calm. "He doesn't blame you either."

"You should've seen the film. I look like a rookie."

"You're only one year removed. You'll get 'em next time you see 'em."

I growl. "They better hope that isn't the playoffs."

He laughs. "Millenport? The only way you'll meet them there is if they buy tickets."

The thought of getting the boar back on a national stage is too appealing for me to let go. "Hey, one and five isn't out of it."

"That sounds like something you heard at the Dragons."

"Are you allowed to bad-mouth your own team like that?"

"I'm not on the clock now."

I ask him about work, and as he tells me about Morty and his friend Alex and the old stag Paul, I realize that he did it again: he made me feel better. "I can't wait for Sunday to get here. I miss you," I say as we're hanging up.

"Miss you too, tiger," he says. He doesn't use the Lauren Bacollie voice.

No questions about my family. If he thinks I need a push to handle it, I'm sure he'd have given me one. I smile at my phone,

set it down, and get to bed.

Game day dawns bright and cloudy. It's going to be a temperate mid-fifties, which is good for us. If we were playing in Gateway, we'd be playing in single-digit temperatures with snow flurries. Their wolverine's thick claws, a big advantage in slick, snowy conditions, aren't so much of an advantage in our stadium, even if it rains. That doesn't make him less dangerous; it just makes us more able to cope with him.

I feel comfortable with my knowledge of the plays; less so with my ability to mesh with Gerrard and Carson. I was feeling fine about that until Lee brought it up again. But he was right; it is something I need to understand better. I spent an extra two hours watching film on Saturday, and I found three plays in the Millenport game where I ended up in the same place as Gerrard because I didn't see him deviate from the play.

I asked Steez, Saturday, to get me some film of really good linebacking units, and he clapped me on the shoulder. "Watch Gateway," he said. "Next week we look at film. This week you will be good." Those words stick in my head as I change, as the familiar pre-game rituals go on. I sit with Gerrard and Carson, waiting for our punch from Aston, and then we gather the rest of the defense and head out to the field.

The scene is much the same as the previous week. Many of the same signs are out: I spot "Dev's Divas" again, this time seeing a coyote in a fancy scarf holding one end of the sign, a slender little tiger holding the other. I don't know if the people with the "We're Behind You #57" sign realize the double entendre they've created, but their sign makes me smile. I raise my fist to the cheers of people as we jog by them. Ty, the wiry fox rookie, jogs with me. "Gettin' a good fan club going," he says.

"I guess." He makes me think of Lee. My fox isn't in the stands, but knowing he's on his way here is enough to keep me bouncing through the pre-game intros. Then we're out on the field and the Gateway Tornadoes and their star runner Bixon are coming after

us.

Their O-line is different from Millenport's. For one thing, it's smaller and quicker, designed to push people out of the way rather than stop them cold. So they have a pair of Dall sheep on the line, blockers who'll go low and use their horns to force our tackles to go a particular direction. Pike and Brick can handle them, I've no doubt, but then they have a pretty good fullback, an elk who uses his antlers to clear out running lanes. So they run the iso—isolation play—a lot, sending the elk to block me or Gerrard while Bixon lowers his head and sends his compact, muscled form through the lane.

For the elk and the wolverine, the instructions are the same. Grab him low, tackle the legs, or else wrap him up completely, Steez and Coach told us. Bixon, especially, will bull through or spin out of any half-assed tackle. And watch out for his claws.

They have a rookie QB, though. If we can stop Bixon enough to make them throw, we have a really good chance of winning this. So when I line up, I'm hopping from side to side, certain we're going to see a run. Sure enough, they run the iso. I watch the play develop and shadow the slot receiver in case it's a fake, but it wouldn't be, not this early in the game. Gerrard tackles the elk and Carson knocks down Bixon.

Second down, they run it to my side. The Dall sheep force Pike and Brick apart, the elk pushes Gerrard again, and Bixon squirts through, coming right at me. The slot receiver tries to throw a block, but I slide away from him and dive for Bixon's legs.

Sweet Lion Jesus, he's fast. I barely catch one foot, but that puts enough of a hitch in his run that Vonni and Pace have time to come in and pull him down. First down.

We stop them twenty yards later, on a run that Pace and I help stuff. They pin us deep in our own territory. "Gonna be a long game," Gerrard says grimly as we trot back to the sidelines. I just nod.

We don't make much progress on our series. Before long, we're

back out there again, working hard on every play. I catch Bixon once, but miss him twice more, swiping at empty air and falling to the ground. I'm not the only one: Vonni whiffs twice, Carson twice, and even Gerrard once. The guy's just fast. But I hate the feeling, the helplessness, the slow getting up and watching the play finish somewhere down the field from you. When we do catch him, it takes two of us to bring him down every time, except once, on a corner blitz, when Norton dashes around the line and takes him out at the knees a second after he gets the ball, before he can get any momentum.

Near halftime, we're still scoreless. I find myself hoping he'll run to the other side on this play, just so I don't have to chase him or tackle him again. The moment I think that, the thought repulses me. What am I, a coward? What would Lee say if he knew I wanted to run away from a fight? What would my dad say? I clench my fists and brace myself. Lucky me: they snap the ball, hand it to Bixon, and here he comes around the line. I dodge the elk and sprint to meet him.

I see a white smile, a lowered shoulder. I realize at the last second that my angle is wrong, but I can't change it. I'm low, trying to tackle him around the waist, but he's lower. He drives his shoulder into my ribs and knocks me backwards, flat on my ass to the turf.

Something hurts when I get up, but I ignore it. The groan from the crowd means something bad happened. I look up at the screen for the replay and see myself getting flattened, see Pace swipe and miss, see Norton push Bixon out of bounds at the three. Easy score from here. Just a matter of time.

Getting up like that is worse than getting up after a whiff. I'm near the opposing sideline, so I get some jeers from the other players. "Nice dance moves," and "Paper tiger," and other, less creative ones.

Zillo comes out to meet me. "You're out," he says, pointing at Steez, who is gesturing for me to run to him on the sideline. I

hurry up, so we don't end up with twelve players on the field, but I don't go to Steez. I slam down on the bench, growling at myself. Everyone else stays away from me. I keep seeing myself in the cheerleader outfit, a photo now posted in my locker. Is that how the team's going to see me from now on?

They line up. Bixon gets stuffed on the first down. The clock keeps running.

It's a tight game. That yardage I gave up could be the difference. Zillo isn't as good as I am, but Corey's going to be back in a couple weeks. If I don't do...something, anything, I'm going to lose the starting job. I'm going to be a story Gerrard will tell his kids, about the gay football player who was pretty good for a couple games, that Ty will tell some gay wideout in about ten years like Fisher told me about Tony Calhoun.

I flex my claws, ignoring the stabbing pain in my side. For the first time in a long time, I really feel like I've let my fox down. My father, now, he'll be sure to talk to me after this. He'll tell me how only really tough guys can make it, not faggots who have sissy fox boyfriends. This horrible future keeps running in a circle in front of my eyes. If only they don't score, I think. If only, if only—but on the next play, Bixon crashes through our line, sends Zillo staggering backwards, and lunges over the goal line.

Their kicker trots out onto the field. I get an idea, a flash, and I scramble to my feet. Steez yells something at me as I run past him, right to Coach. "Put me in," I gasp, one paw at my side holding in the pain.

He glares at me. "What?"

"Kick blocking." I wave frantically at the field where they're assembling for the point after. The officials are reviewing the touchdown, but I can see the replay up on the big screen, and I know it's going to stand.

"Sit down," Coach growls. "You can't jump, not like that."

"Put me in!" I insist. "I did it with Hilltown! We mess with their heads, they screw it up. Look at their kicker!"

He stares, then looks across the field. The Gateway kicker is a rabbit, talented but more prone to being rattled than our big stallion Charm. I'm aware of the red lights of TV cameras on near us. He shrugs, finally, and calls over the special teams coach. They have a quick conversation, and thirty seconds later, when the touchdown is upheld, I run out onto the field with the motley crew of rookies and our two special teams veterans, both rabbits.

Rabbits are great kick blockers; they can really jump. But they're specialists, so most teams don't keep more than two—if a rabbit plays running back or wideout, he's too valuable to block kicks. The coaches have to deploy them carefully along the line. Then the blockers have to figure out where the kicker thinks they're going to be, maybe move after the snap, and time their jumps. Extra points get blocked about once every fifteen or twenty tries, I forget what the actual percentage is.

So I go in and set up with the rabbits behind the main line. Because Gateway's kicker is left-footed, he tends to pull his kicks to his right, our left. I line up in the center and our rabbits line up to either side of me, planning to jump to that left side once the ball is snapped. My job is to give them one more guy to think about, one more potential blocker to spook the kicker and hopefully make him kick it right into one of the rabbits. It worked in college, but college kickers are way easier to spook than pros. The only time it worked in Hilltown was against a rabbit kicker.

I stand tall behind the line, glaring down at the holder, a skinny brown wolf. I catch his eye and snarl down at him. His ears flatten. He turns and says something to the spotted rabbit lining up to kick, who looks at me as well. I bounce up and down on my feet, pretending to practice my vertical leap, and they call time out. In a game that's 6-0 right now, a grinding, slow game, this extra point could mean a lot.

The pain in my side fades. The memory of being flattened is far away. I stalk around with the rest of the kick-blocking unit, yelling, "Yeah! Yeah! We got 'em worried!"

At first they all stare at me. Kick blocking is where the guys who barely made the team get put, and they don't usually spend energy getting fired up. I push them, waving my arms, and then turn to the crowd. The crowd responds with cheers, and my teammates catch my enthusiasm: grins, growls and shoves go back and forth. We're all practically dancing at the line when the time out's over and the kicking team comes back on.

The holder and kicker ignore me. I line up between the rabbits, same as before. When the ball's snapped, the rabbit to my right dives left, gathers himself, and leaps at the same time as the other, all four paws rising ten feet into the air. On my side, I don't get quite as high, but I leap forward at the same time, my eye on the ball as it travels away from me, to my left.

I land on a teammate, a stag, though not on his head, thankfully. Pain crackles through my chest again as I watch the ball sail past both rabbits, up, and up...and wide of the goalposts. The officials below sweep their arms from side to side: no good.

You'd think we'd just scored. I smack my teammates on the back and they do the same to me, and when I get to the sidelines, Coach just smiles at me and shakes his head. I sit on the bench for one second and then pop up again, unable to restrain my energy.

On the kickoff, Ty gets the ball. He darts to one side, back to the other, sheds a tackle, and springs out into the middle of the field, with only the kicker to beat. Now we're all jumping up and down, screaming at him: Go! Go! Go!

On film, later, we'll see the fox smirk as he leaps to avoid the kicker's diving tackle. The rabbit grabs at Ty's bushy red tail, and for a moment it looks like he caught it. Then the fox lands, his tail flicks free, and he's off like a rocket. Nobody else comes near him.

"TOUCHDOWN FIREBIRDS!" screams the PA. The crowd goes nuts. Ty stands in the end zone, arms spread, and when he comes back to the sideline, we mob him. He's not letting go of the ball, grinning fit to bust.

"Nice run, Fish," Coach says, and nods at the ball. "Keep it. For

now."

Charm bumps me on his way out to kick the extra point. "They ain't gonna rattle *me*," he says, and they don't. He boots it through as clean and true as I've seen him kick it.

And so we're up, 7-6, at halftime. Except for the stabbing in my ribs, which I don't mention to anyone, my embarrassing moment is wiped clean. I leave the phone off at halftime, though I dearly want to text Lee and find out what he thinks, if he's off the plane by now.

The fact that I made up for my gaffe doesn't stop the guys from giving me a hard time about it. "Goin' out for soccer?" Norton says, elbowing me. "Practicin' your flopping?"

"Har har."

"Nah, he was just tryin' to clear outta the way so he could play on special teams again." Vonni comes up, his tail wagging.

"Maybe if one of you two could've backed me up..."

"You weigh both of us put together," Norton says.

"I wouldn't go after that guy one on one." Vonni holds his paws up, grinning.

"I'm not that heavy," I punch Norton in the shoulder and he falls dramatically backwards, over a bench.

"Oh, help!" he calls, waving his arms from the floor.

"Asshole," I laugh.

It's a weird atmosphere in the room. Even though we're only up a point, we feel like we've got all the momentum. Coach gives us a short, punchy speech about how we've taken the best they can throw at us and we've kicked it right back in their faces—a shout-out to Charm, who raises his hands over his head and yells "Fuckin' A!"

The defensive line is getting a lesson on plugging the wolverine's running holes. Over across the locker room, I see Aston and Jaws talking to our offensive coordinator. It's the busiest, most intense halftime I've ever been in. Gerrard takes me and Carson aside and tells us that from now on, there's always going to be two

of us on Bixon. If it's just one linebacker, then one of the safeties will come down to help.

I grin until Gerrard asks me, "You looking forward to going back out?"

"Hell yeah!" This little talk means that I'm starting the second half. They still trust me. Whether Gerrard understands or not, I don't know, but he smiles back at the same time as he shakes his head.

I pump my fist as we jog back out. My legs ache, my side still hurts, but I feel great. I'm gonna take that wolverine down if it kills me.

This time, some of the Tornadoes' O-line snicker at me on our way out to the spot. "Hey, Twinkletoes," one of the sheep calls. "Nice fall. Get your ass taped up?"

I flex my claws. I ignore him. Lee's watching me on TV somewhere. I glare into the backfield, and I line up. The ball's snapped, and we play.

My ribs don't bother me, not for the most part. Then again, I'm so hyped up that I might just be ignoring it. I played a whole half on a broken paw in high school, and this doesn't hurt nearly as much as that did. It'd take a lot more to keep me off the field.

They run twice for every pass, and the "Twinkletoes" taunts die away into the grunts and thuds of bodies slamming into each other. Three times in the quarter I get near Bixon, twice with Gerrard backing me up, once with Norton. We corral him, limiting him to a short gain. He and the elk are getting through the line a lot less, though our guys are getting tired and Bixon's a machine, legs churning as strongly as they did in the first quarter.

Our offense isn't doing great. Jaws might be a wolverine, but anyone can see he's not quite as elusive as Bixon. He punches into their defense for a yard here, two yards there. Aston only has time for short passes, and our receivers are hit as soon as they catch. But they do catch, and Jaws gets one nice run off on this series, a blown assignment by their defensive end. We force our way down

into field goal range and Charm kicks one through to put us up 10-6. We go into the fourth thinking that's pretty good as leads go. "Just hold 'em, team," Coach says, and we yell our approval.

The field feels like a war zone the first time we go out in the fourth. The red numbers on the black uniforms facing us look like blood. We batter them again and again, trying to force a breach, clawing at every crack in their formation. They, just as determined, brace and hold. When they try to spread us out with passes, Gerrard sniffs out the plays and waves me and Carson back as they're happening—not that either of us needs waving. The QB is really bad at disguising pass play, and it doesn't take us long to locate the short receivers.

Then, in the second series, Bixon breaks free on the iso again. I'm between him and the end zone. He sees me, lowers his head, and I backpedal, looking for the angle to cut him off. Gerrard, having tossed the elk to the ground, charges in where I'd been. He gets an arm around Bixon, but the wolverine shakes him off and charges toward me. He doesn't grin at me. He's all business. So am I.

I meet him solidly, on the other side from my hurt ribs, which complain anyway. My arm holds him, slows him down. He drags me another yard. Carson hits him from the other side. Incredibly, he pushes us both another yard down the field, getting the first down before we pull him to the ground.

They go to Bixon twice more; we hold him to two yards. They play-fake on third and eight, completing a short pass to their slot receiver, a gazelle. I bring him down short of the first down marker, but they're in range for a field goal. We limp back to the sidelines.

"Good tackle. Stay there," Coach growls to me as the field goal blocking team runs out. Sucking wind, paws on my knees, I don't feel any urge to run out and join them, this time. My ribs feel like someone's jammed a knife in there. My wrist is sore.

"You okay?" Steez asks sharply. Behind him, Zillo's looking

anxiously at me, not at all the way he did in the first half, and not at all the way Pike looked at an injured Fisher. Guess he isn't anxious for another taste of blocking Bixon.

"Fine," I growl, and watch them kick a long field goal to come within 10-9.

Ten minutes to go. We watch our offense drive down and stall. Jaws, spurred by his counterpart's success, is running as well as I've seen him, but we just can't get past midfield. Charm paces the sidelines, antsy for another try, staring between the scoreboard and the field. Gerrard and Carson and I just stand in a small huddle, not talking, watching until it's our turn to go out. They're as winded as I am.

If the offense didn't score, at least they did take time off the clock. Six minutes left when we go out to stop them again. And now the Tornadoes are starting to panic. They stop giving the ball to Bixon, aware of the time, letting their rookie QB toss short passes that will stop the clock if they're not caught.

This is the best thing we could hope for. Their receivers are cold; most of them haven't caught a pass all game. I stick to that gazelle, and swat away one ball meant for him. The rest of the time, the wolf doesn't even throw to him. On plays where I see the gazelle lose interest, I drop off him and help with the pass rush, getting myself one sack out of it when I catch the QB from behind.

The coaches start calling more blitzes to disrupt the young wolf's throwing. Leaping towards him on one play, I see his wide eyes as he scrambles. I almost feel sorry for him.

We come back to the sidelines having left five minutes on the clock, and the offense goes out to chew it up. I give Gerrard a smile and get one back, a survivor's smile. A winner's smile.

Again, though, our offense just can't move the ball. They take as much time as they can, but have to punt back to the Tornadoes with thirty seconds. Our fans are on their feet, a roaring sea of red and gold. Dully, we listen to the defensive coordinator tell us to "blanket the receivers." I jog out, ignoring my wrist and ribs, my

world narrowed to the gazelle. All of us on defense are similarly focused, summoning our last reserves to get through this series. At least they can't run it, not if they want more than one play. It flashes through my mind that they could try that, if desperate. Go to their best player no matter what the situation.

I can't tell anything from looking at Bixon, but the gazelle is clearly hyped and alert. He's staring back at the QB, so I know, I *know* he's been told to get open for a pass. I don't have the luxury of glancing at Gerrard, not on this critical snap. But I trust my instincts. When the ball's snapped, I shadow the gazelle so close I can tell what he had for breakfast.

Later, I'll see the game film. The QB looks my way once, then looks away again and heaves a pass downfield. It's a perfect spiral and lands softly right in the arms of the fox at our five-yard line. It would be a storybook ending for Gateway, except that the fox who falls to the turf clutching the ball to his chest is Vonni, in his Firebirds red and gold. The furious cheetah in red and black, the intended receiver, throws him down and then punches his teammate in frustration, refusing to go to the sidelines until he's dragged there. I know how that feels.

But all I know in this moment is that the game's over. The fireworks and the giant phoenix screaming across the scoreboard shrieking "FIREBIRDS WIN" is becoming familiar, but today it's especially sweet. The stadium shakes with cheers. I stand out on the field for a moment before we walk over and congratulate the Tornadoes.

Mostly the post-game milling around on the field is a chance for guys who know each other to exchange quick hugs or pats without the tension of the impending game. Occasionally it's a chance for us to congratulate someone on an outstanding performance, and that's why me and a bunch of the rest of the defense head for Bixon and his blockers.

The Dall sheep are pretty nice guys, panting almost as hard as we are. They both give me a look when our little group comes up

to them, but nothing more than that. They clap Pike on the back, and call me "Twinkles" with punches on the arm. I take 'em with a grin, though they jar my ribs. The nickname's gained respect in just the last thirty minutes.

Bixon catches my eye as he's walking, talking to two reporters. I tap Gerrard, and the two of us jog over to meet him.

"Give us a minute," he tells the reporters, and they hang back, both eyeing me now, too, disappointment in their flattened ears and slumped shoulders. Bixon wraps one arm around me and says, next to my arm, "Keep practicin', you'll make the ballet someday."

"Fuck you," I say, but he's laughing, so I add, "you goddamn bulldozer."

He gives Gerrard a one-armed hug, too, and grins at us. "Ain't nobody held me under a hundred yards before today. Ain't gonna happen again."

"Thanks for the schooling," Gerrard says, grinning his coyote best. "We'll hold you under fifty in the playoffs."

"Ah," Bixon waves off the compliment. "We ain't gonna sniff the playoffs 'til next year. Give Shanky time to grow a bit." He glances back at the reporters. "Just wanted to say it was fun runnin' over yas."

My ribs pulse. "Wish I could say the same."

He laughs and points at me. "And good on you, Miski. Ain't just knockin' people over makes a guy tough." And then—I swear—he winks.

I don't know what to say except, "Thanks," as he waves and heads back to the reporters.

"Good game," Gerrard says to me. Carson joins us as we walk back. "Some things to work on still, but overall good."

"Gonna see that play a few times," Carson says.

"Yeah, well." I look over my shoulder at their sideline, where I see their kicker disappearing into their locker room. "I'll take it."

"Hell yeah you will," Gerrard says with unexpected passion, and a fierce smile. "You're a football player."

Those words keep me even warmer than Coach's post-game speech. Ty gets the game ball, but Vonni, Gerrard, and I get mentions too. "He might need to learn a few things about tackling," Coach says, looking at me, "but he showed he's willing to do whatever this team needs."

"Wouldn'ta thought you'd have trouble wrapping up a guy," Charm says, elbowing me in the back.

"You should be glad you got me on *your* team," I snort. "You'd never get one of them pansy kicks past me."

"*My* team?" Charm says. "I thought you were playin' for the *other* team!"

"Come on," Gerrard says, bare-chested, holding his shirt over one arm. His wrist is taped up. "Charm, Dev, get showered and get out there to talk to the reporters."

"Reporters? Me?" They must have noticed I went out for the extra point. I wouldn't have thought they would care.

He shrugs. "Coach said to send you out."

"Seriously?" I start pulling my uniform off, ignoring the jabs of pain from my ribs. "What the hell?"

I hurry into the shower, where there are still a bunch of guys. Nobody really takes notice of me except Colin, whose eyes widen. I turn away before I can see his expression twist into a scowl. When I turn around with two paws full of fur shampoo, though, he's still there. Back turned to me, but still there. I don't have time to think about it; I just scrub myself, rinse off, and grab a towel to run back out.

While I'm dressing, though, Zillo comes up to me in his street clothes. His ears are flat, his tail down, and he's having trouble looking right at me. He doesn't say anything, so as I'm pulling a shirt on, I say, "Hey."

"Hey." He leans against the locker beside mine. "That Bixon...fuck. He's a fuckin'..."

"Bulldozer?"

"Yeah." Now he looks at me, a little bit of a smile at the corners

of his muzzle. “Can’t imagine getting flattened by him.”

“I don’t have to.”

“Yeah.” He looks off to his right. I don’t need to check to know that that’s where Colin is. “Hey, what you did, with the kick…that was cool.”

I yank the shirt on, tuck it in, and smile at him. “Cool?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“All right. Thanks.” I stick out my paw.

He looks at it, then shakes it. I clap him on the shoulder with my other paw. “Appreciate it. Now I gotta go deal with the media.” His ears come up, and hell, so do mine. He’s not so bad a guy after all.

I make it out before Charm and slide in beside coach. My tail’s all twitching about my special teams thing, so the first time I get called on, I sit up straight and give my brightest smile.

It’s a skunk from TSN. She says, “Did the Gateway players say anything particularly aimed at you?”

I frown. “Like what?”

“Homophobic slurs.”

“Oh.” I pause. “No. Nothing. Everyone’s very respectful.”

The next one asks if I felt threatened. Then there’s another one for Coach, and by that time, Charm’s out and they ask him about keeping his cool after the other kicker missed the point. There aren’t any more questions for me until a beige-colored swift fox raises a paw casually and says, “Coach. Why’d you send Miski out with the special teams unit?”

“It was his idea,” Coach says, turning to me. “You wanna tell ’em?” So I talk about how I felt responsible for the touchdown, and how I’d covered kicks on special teams with the Dragons, and I just wanted to try to psych out the kicker.

“Sounds like it worked,” says the local Chevali guy, and the room murmurs appreciation. At least, that’s what I feel like they’re murmuring. And there’s no more talk about fucking stupid homophobia.

They don't keep us too long after that. I walk back to my locker with Coach, who punches my shoulder and says, "Hey, if Charm gets hurt, can you kick, too?"

I wish people would stop punching my fucking shoulder. I laugh and say, "Nobody can kick like Charm."

He eyes me. "How's the ribs?"

"Fine."

"Go see doc."

"But—" I choke back the rest of the protest as he growls. My ears flatten. "Yes, sir."

So instead of getting my things, I go to the training room and see our team doctor. His webbed paws probe my sore ribs and he clucks at me. "Cracked, for sure," he says, and hands me a brace and an unmarked bottle. "Here, for the pain. Take your day off and rest them, and they'll heal by Sunday."

'Heal' is football-doctor-talk for 'will be good enough to play on.' I take the bottle. "Need bandages or anything?"

He shrugs. "Keep the brace on until Tuesday, so they don't move too much. If it gets worse, we'll give you padding, but you don't want that. Restricts your movement. Just don't get run over by any wolverines this week."

I snort. "Thanks."

So it's a good hour after the end of the game before I finally flick my phone on. There are several texts from Lee, but I skip right to the last one, which reads, *It's so hot down here in Chevali. I had to take all my clothes off.*

I grin, picturing him. My sheath gets nice and warm. I take a moment to savor that, then give Gerrard a quick call to let him know I won't be going out for drinks with the defense. He says he and Carson are getting together tomorrow on our day off to practice. Lee's leaving around four, so I ask if we can do it at four-thirty, and he says that works.

I have a voicemail, too. On my way out to the car, I listen to it, hoping that holding the phone to my ear will dissuade Argonne or

any other groupies who might be out there. But maybe because of all the delays, the parking lot is mostly empty. So there's nobody to see me stop in shock when I hear the message.

"Devlin, it's your father. I'm in town and would like to see you after the game. Please call me and tell me where we can meet for dinner."

The phone sits in my paw long after the message has cut off. I stare at my reflection in the window of my truck, orange fur highlighted by the setting sun. I look young to myself, bright and unreal. Where the hell am I going to take my father for dinner? And what am I going to do with Lee?

I call Lee from the truck. He purrs a hello, and I hate myself for having to answer with, "My father called. He's in town."

He gets it immediately. "Are you coming back here?"

"Not yet. I'm going to meet him for dinner."

"There's a hotel half a mile away. Weather's nice. I'll walk down there and check in."

My heart melts. "Thanks, fox."

"Go get 'im," he says.

I call my father and, with no other place coming to mind, direct him to the Sonoran restaurant where we ate with Fisher and Gena. Was it only three weeks ago? I ask him why he came down, and he says we'll talk over dinner.

But he's not at the restaurant when I get there. I walk up to the chinchilla at the host's stand and ask for a table for two. He asks if I want to sit down or wait, and I just stare, unable to decide. "Why don't you wait for your other party?" he says kindly.

Dad walks in ten minutes later, filling the doorway and looming over the small chinchilla before he spots me getting up to meet him. We stand a foot apart, awkwardly. "Devlin," he says, and looks around at the green, red, and white flags, the fake adobe walls, the shiny red brick floor. "Nice place."

"They make great margaritas here." I realize I've never seen Dad drink anything but beer at a restaurant. He doesn't respond,

just nods and follows the chinchilla to our table, a small two-seater by one of the windows. It's a nice view, overlooking a field of cactus just barely lit by the dusk, but I don't take in more than that before sitting down across from Dad.

He's got on a nice shirt, dressed up like for church. When he sits, he rests his elbows on the table and his paws in front of him, and his tail curls around the chair leg. To avoid meeting his eyes, I grab the menu and read off some of the choices. "They don't have burritos. The enchiladas are good. I don't know about the chicken, but the carne—the steak was good and tender. The salsa's pretty spicy, so you might wanna watch out."

I realize I'm babbling, and stop. He stays silent as the waiter comes over, a small weasel. "Good evening," he says, and then smiles. "Mister Miski?"

My father and I both look up at the same time. The waiter's looking at me, and I recognize the weasel who served us when we were here with Fisher and Gena. "Oh, yes," I say, trying to force a nice smile. "How've you been?"

"So nice to see you back. Another margarita?"

"Um." My eyes flick to Dad. His expression hasn't changed. "Sure."

"And is this your father?" The weasel executes a funny little mini-bow. "So pleased to meet you, sir. Welcome to Casa Nuestra. Can I offer you one of our margaritas?"

"Bud." Dad looks down at the food menu.

"You sure?" The waiter gives us a nice smile. "It's on the house."

"I want a Bud," Dad says.

"Great, okay, I'll be right back with those." He scurries off. I have the brief image of a more stable Ogleby, and then of a whole team of them tending the bar.

"So," I say, "thanks for coming down. Did you go to the game?"

He shakes his head. "Watched it in a bar."

"Which bar?"

“Something near the airport. Extra Point, I think. Sounded like a sports bar.”

“I could’ve gotten you tickets.”

His fingers turn the pages of the menu, slowly. “I didn’t decide to come down until this morning.”

“Still, you could’ve called…”

“I did not want to disrupt your practice.” I notice his claws are out, scratching along the plastic of the menu as he closes it.

The waiter comes back with our drinks and then takes out a pad. “Taco salad,” Dad says, holding up his menu.

The weasel coughs politely. “Sir, do you mean the…” He trails off.

“Give him a green salad on top of some taco shells, and a ceviche de huachinango and the carne a la parrilla for me,” I say, and hand my menu over.

“With taco meat,” Dad says to the waiter, who this time doesn’t need my help. He scribbles down notes on his pad and leaves us alone.

Dad leans back in his chair. “Come here pretty often?”

I shake my head. “Just a couple times.”

“They know you from a couple times?”

My ears get a bit warm. “They know me from the team,” I say.

“But they know you like a margarita.” He points to the Top Shelf I’m about to raise to my lips.

“I had the same waiter.” I shift in my chair and put the drink down. “He must be a good waiter.”

“When did you start drinking,” he gestures at my glass, “those?”

He says it casually, as if there’s nothing else on his mind, but there’s an edge to it. It’s a strange manner from my usually direct father. Does he disapprove of me drinking, or just drinking tequila? I don’t know how to react other than to tell him I drink them casually, but that I usually drink beer. Which he started giving me when I was ten. He takes a drink of his, and says he never

understood what was so good about rum or tequila or any of those fancy drinks. He has vodka on special occasions, or bourbon.

I ask him how his beer is, and he says "it's Bud." I drank Bud all through high school, and a year into college before Randy taught me that Old Hilltown is cheaper. You can choke down two and a half "moldies" for the price of one Bud.

The margarita tastes stronger than it did that night with Fisher. Maybe it's me. "I really appreciate you coming down," I say.

"Your mother thinks we can resolve things better in person."

He takes another drink of his beer, sets it down. I drink my margarita and then set it aside. The restaurant is busy, and there is chatter all around us. My tail twitches, unable to remain at rest, and in my lap, my fingers lace back and forth. It's crazy, but I wish Lee were with me. He just makes me feel more confident, calmer, and capable. Even in the presence of my father. I wait for him to say something, but when he doesn't, I start.

"Did you come to apologize?"

His brow darkens. It's the kind of look that makes me glad we're in a public place. "I have nothing to apologize for."

"You dislocated his thumb."

"I am not here to talk about some fox." He spits out the word "fox" as though it were something filthy. "I am here to talk about you."

"He's not 'some fox.'"

"He is none of my concern."

"You *broke* his *paw!* He's in a cast for eight weeks!"

He leans forward, staring. "What do you want? You want me to pay for the hospital?"

"Jesus, no!" I say that a little louder than I'd meant to, but nobody looks around. Pain jabs through my side. I press a paw to my ribs, lowering my voice. "I paid for the hospital. I paid for the hotel we stayed in that night. I'm paying for this dinner. I can afford it. I just want you to say you're sorry."

"Sorry for defending my family?"

“How is picking a fight with Lee ‘defending your family’?”

His eyes narrow. “It was not a fight.”

“I’m sorry. ‘Unprovoked attack’?”

His claws are out again, curved and white against his orange-and-black paw. “In a fight, someone hits, someone hits back.”

“You wanted Lee to hit you?”

He snorts. “I did not hit him. And I did not expect that he would hit back.”

I shake my head. “That’s not how he was brought up.”

“Of course not. No respect.”

I stare at him. “For what? For you? You didn’t give him—”

His fist slams down onto the table, making the glasses rattle. “For the rules I raised *you* to live with.”

Now people are looking at us, like they know I’m being punished. My ribs give a twinge as I lean back. “This doesn’t have anything to do with that,” I mumble.

“Like hell,” he says. “You have changed.” He points a finger at me.

“I don’t lie, and I don’t steal.”

“That is not what I mean. I am talking about respect for your parents. It is about your family, about life.” His paw remains clenched in a fist, but he leaves it on the table.

For God’s sake. “You didn’t even give Lee a chance.”

“I do not need to drop a tire iron on my toes to know I do not like it.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.” Something stirs in me, like seeing a wolverine heading for the open field around my defense. My legs tense. My tail curls around my calf. I smell the open grass of the football field.

“What does not make sense is you throwing away your reputation to gain some publicity. Yes, you are a little famous now, but is it worth what all these people think of you? That they say, ‘Oh, there goes Devlin the faggot’?”

“Who says that?” I say. “Besides you.”

He frowns. “People say it behind my back. Your fox says it to my nose.”

“Well, he’s allowed to.” I sigh, again, at Lee and his self-control issues. “He doesn’t say it in public, anyway.”

“Yes, I am noticing for all his courage, he is not announcing himself. He lets you take all the rumors and whispers, while he is safe in the shadow.”

“I’m telling you, nobody cares as much as you do.”

His eyes lower. “We do care, your mother and me. You know we would love you even if you were not playing football, do you not?”

“What does that mean? Why am I not playing football?”

“When Mitchell comes back, you will lose the starting job again. I know you wish for a way to make yourself famous so you will keep starting, but there are better ways—”

He stops, maybe because I’m staring with my jaw hanging open. “Is that what you think? You think I made this up—”

“No, no.” He shakes his head. “That fox made it up. He tricked you into going along with it.” He waves a paw. “Some of *them*, they can be cunning. Easy to confuse a young cub.”

“Lion Christ, Dad, I’m twenty-four.” I lift the margarita glass and take another drink. “Ease off the protective parent crap.”

“Do not talk back to me.”

“Then stop talking stupid.”

I know it’s trouble as soon as I snap it out. He glares, his eyebrows lowering, two fangs showing. His voice gets deeper and slower, the growl clear behind it. “I thought you were interested in talking.”

“I am.” I’m shaking. I tip my margarita to my lips again. The salt and tequila numb my tongue.

We stare at each other over my glass until I put it down. Dad mutters something under his breath and then relaxes, with a visible effort. “All I am saying,” he says, “is that you can always come home.”

The words feel rehearsed, but I can feel sincerity behind them. The word "home" especially grabs me, defusing my tension, and it's not weird anymore to be sitting in this Sonoran place with my dad, drinking.

Until he says, "As long as you respect your family."

Everything comes rushing back. I grab my drink again. "How the hell is being gay not respecting you?" I snarl.

His muzzle darkens, his eyes almost slits. "Watch your tone with me."

I finish the margarita, slide the glass to one side. "Stop fucking treating me like I'm twelve!"

"Then stop acting like it." He's restraining himself, but his claws are out and his face and ears are abnormally still.

"What do you want me to say? What do you want me to do?"

He goes on, after a moment. "You make this announcement, you just bring this fox home..."

"You don't want me to bring Lee home any more."

He makes a noise like I'd told him the Dragons were terrible this year, or that the sun was going to come up in the east. "We would like you to find someone suitable for you."

"We? Mom is on board with this?"

"It is not what family is about."

"It's not what *your* idea of family is about."

I can't see anything but his expression. The smell of the margarita overwhelms most everything, so I can't get much of Dad's scent. My whiskers are crackling with enough tension that I don't need to. I honestly have no idea what he's going to say. I almost wish the waiter would show up with our food.

"Gregory, now, he—"

"Goddammit!" And at that moment the waiter does show up with my ceviche. He hesitates at the edge of the table, until we both stop to look at him, and then he puts it down.

"Is...everything okay?"

"Fine," I growl.

He reaches for my empty margarita glass. “Another?”

“Oh, yes. Keep ’em coming.”

“Very good, sir.” He gives my father an anxious glance and then scurries back to the bar.

“Gregory does not drink so much,” Dad says.

“Oh, he does. He just doesn’t let you see it.”

He huffs through his nose. Of course, I have no idea how much Gregory drinks. He probably suspects that, but he doesn’t know for sure. “What happened to that girl you brought home, when you were nineteen?”

That would’ve been Paulia, a tigress. “We broke up.”

“I liked her. She was polite and pretty.”

“Mom hated her.”

“She did not insult our family.”

I roll my eyes. I see the waiter coming back with my margarita and wait for him to drop it off before continuing. It’s not quite as strong as the last one. I wonder if the waiter asked for a weaker one specifically. “If I could be like Gregory, I would.”

“I know how your football world is,” he says. “You can have any girl you want.”

“I can have any boy I want,” I counter. Then I have to take another drink. Why the hell would I say something like that?

“All this fame,” he says slowly, “it is attractive. But it is not worth it.”

I drop the glass to the table. “Sweet Lion Jesus, Dad, it’s not about the fame. It’s about Lee.”

He shakes his head slowly. “Gregory’s wife supports his career and his family. She gives him a son. Is this fox giving you a son?”

“He’s supporting my career. He helped me get drafted.”

“Fagh.” He leans across the table. “It makes you look weak.”

“Weak? What the fuck?”

He starts to say something at the f-word, and then just shakes his head. “People laugh at me, say my boy is a *хуэсос*.”

“Oh, come on,” I say. “I’m sure nobody in the auto shop speaks

Siberian."

I never could make him laugh, even when he was in a good mood. "You think this is funny?" he growls.

"Why do you give a shit what the people at the auto shop say?"

He leans over, pumps a fist in front of his chest. "I have good, strong sons, they respect me. I have weak sons, then..." He opens his paw.

"God damn. At least my teammates only think I'm weak when I get run over."

"There are many kinds of weak." He leans back and nods as though he's made some great philosophical statement.

"Dad, I hit people for a living."

He shrugs. "You hit people in padded uniforms. It is like hitting your girlfriend."

That throws me. I gulp down more of my drink so that I don't have to try to make sense of that. "I'm not a fucking psycho. I'm just gay."

He jabs his finger at me and leaves it hanging there. "You are weak, you are confused by bright lights and cunning f—foxes."

I lick the salt of the margarita from my lips. My ribs ache. "*His* name is Lee. You can remember that, can't you?"

He sets his beer down, and his muzzle curls in a sneer. “I would not call that fox ‘he.’ A strong male fights when attacked.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t teach me to be a fucking bigot.”

“They teach you this word, ‘bigot,’ and you do not even know what it means.” He tries to say it casually, but his paws are fists,

and he's got the tension of a lineman waiting for the snap.

"Will you stop with the fucking 'they'? I know what it means. It means that you can't open your eyes far enough to see someone I care about, to treat him like a person, to feel any sort of responsibility for breaking his thumb. If it was Gregory coming home gay—"

Now he comes out of his chair again. "You will not come home again with that fox!"

"What are you going to do, break his arm next? You can't stop me." Reflexively I'm tensed as well, gripping the table, my hackles raised.

Movement next to us, and the smell of food. A young desert rat holding two plates stares between us.

My father glances at him and then stands all the way up. "I can stop you. You are not to come home again until you give up this stupidity."

"You're going to lock me out? What will the guys at the auto shop say to that?"

He steps away from the table and gives me a look that would chill what's left of my margarita to ice. "They do not need to know our family's business."

"I'll call them. Ivan remembers me."

His look doesn't change. "Then I will tell them that I have no son who is a *хуэсос*."

Just like that, he walks away. It takes me a second to regain enough composure to turn and call after him, but all I can think to yell at his twitching tail is, "Oh yeah? Well, I'll tell people I don't have a father who's..."

He vanishes out the door. Our waiter's come up to stand behind the rat, who is still holding the carne and the taco salad, his eyes wide.

"Is there a problem?" the weasel says quietly, and then adds, "Er, with the food?"

I look around the room. The diners who aren't staring openly at

me are just as obviously not staring. “No,” I say. I sit down and motion the rat to put the food down. “I’m sorry about that. Just a second,” I add as he starts to leave. With a nod to my margarita glass, I pull out my wallet and hand him a pair of hundreds. “Another one of those, please.”

He holds the money. The rat stares at it. “Mister Miski,” the weasel says, “you don’t have to…”

“I’m not going to cause any more trouble,” I say. “I just want one more drink to calm me down. And I want to apologize for the disturbance.”

He nods, quickly, and pockets the money. “Very well.” He motions the rat away and then leans over. The other diners have more or less gone back to minding their own business. “I hope everything is…”

“It’ll be fine.” I already feel like a heel for yelling in the middle of the restaurant. I don’t need his sympathy to make me feel even worse. What I do need, I take out my phone and ask for.

“I’m at the La Quinta,” Lee says. “Saguaro and 14th, room 22.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I’m done with dinner.” The waiter brings my margarita and sets it down. I avoid his sympathetic eyes.

“Did everything…go okay?”

“No.”

He’s quiet. I feel the stirrings of resentment; the anger at my father spilling over into the rest of my life. “I’ll tell you about it later,” I growl. “Dinner just got here.”

“Okay,” he says, still soft. “I’ll be up.”

I hang up and raise the margarita glass to my lips again. The salt stings; the tequila numbs. I swallow.

14

Post-Game (Lee)

It's a good thing I was worried by Dev's phone call, because my ears are perked even as I go through e-mail in the room. So I'm alert enough to hear Dev outside banging on the door next to mine and calling, "Lee. Lee!"

I kept my pants on, because I didn't want to come off too flirty if he was going to be depressed and want to talk. Or if he was going to be drunk and want to crash. Or if I had to go out into the hall to wave at him and hiss. "Psst! Dev!"

He looks up from the door. I wave him over hurriedly. He looks bemusedly at me, then squints at the number on the door. "I thought you said twenty-three," he says, loudly, without moving.

"C'mere!" I wave him over again.

He stabs his finger at the number on the door next to him. "This is twenty-three."

"I'm in twenty-two."

He frowns, and then, just as he lurches toward me, the door beside him opens. "What the hell..."

I see only the sharp muzzle of a rat, his words dying out as he adjusts his gaze upwards about a foot to look at the mountain of tiger in front of his door. I say, "Sorry, sorry, he had the wrong room."

The rat pokes his head out at just the moment I realize that I shouldn't be visible in a hotel with Dev, who is waving his paw

back at the rat as he walks quickly toward me. So I duck back inside and wait for Dev.

He trots in and stops, looking dazed. I have to reach past him to close the door, and he doesn't move out of my way as I throw the deadbolts clumsily. He turns to face me, and I get a whiff of lime and tequila. "This is a nice place," he enunciates.

"Hoo boy." I reach out to put my arms around him.

He pats between my shoulder blades, without hugging back all the way. "This is home," he says.

I try to step back, but his arm tightens. I have to crane my muzzle up. "Do you want to go back to your apartment?"

He scratches his cheek with his free paw. "I want to stay here. I have to stay with you. I don't have anyone else."

That's about the worst I'd imagined this night could go. I eventually get him to the bed, only because it's the only place where we can both sit down in the whole room. There's a desk with a solid wooden chair, but no armchair, no couch, and even the bed is about a foot from the TV table.

He sits down heavily and almost falls backwards before catching himself. I don't know what to say to him, but he's not saying anything. In the light from my computer screen, he looks stark and a bit unreal, his white shirt blue, his orange fur murky brown. After a minute I lean against him and say, "What happened?"

He shrugs. I press a bit closer. "You okay?"

"Fine," he growls. He doesn't sound drunk, now, and he's focusing very sharply on me. Before I can say anything in response, he turns, pushing me down on my back. His paws yank my pants down my hips without bothering with the fasteners.

Fur rips out and my sheath snags on the pants. I yelp and grab at his paws, but he doesn't stop. "Hey, hang on."

He fumbles at his own pants. I try to sit up; he grabs my right arm and spins me around, pushing me down onto my stomach. "Dev," I say, struggling, "don't—"

He's on top of me in a moment, breathing hard in my ear, two hundred twenty pounds of drunk tiger pressing me into the hard mattress. I feel his shirt on my back, his pants against my legs, his hardness against my bare rear. "Where's your lube?"

"I didn't bring it. I didn't think..."

"We did it without before."

He reeks of tequila, but he sounds cold sober now. I don't know what to think. My heart's beating faster, and not the way it usually does around him. I feel him shift, hear him spitting in his paw. My fur prickles. "Listen, wait..."

His muzzle comes up close to my ear. "You're all I got left. My dad hates me because of you."

I say something just to say something, because I need to talk him down from this. "Dev, he doesn't hate you."

"He walked out of the restaurant. Without eating dinner." His voice is unsteady, growling but also wavering. Not with liquor; with emotion.

"He doesn't hate you," I repeat, trying to turn my head to see him. I get close enough to see one eye. "He's angry because he doesn't understand what's going on."

"He said he has no son. He called me a *хуэсос*." He turns, one arm pressed across my back, driving me further into the mattress. His hips lift from mine; a slick finger rubs saliva under my tail. "So I'm gonna be a faggot."

I squirm below him, letting him have his way without struggling. “Dev, listen, we can make love if you want. I love you. That’s okay. But don’t do it because you’re mad.”

He’s breathing harder. He brings his paw back to his muzzle. “I

want to…" He spits again. "I have to…"

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

His chest is still crushing my torso down. I could probably squirm away from him. But at least he stopped to lubricate himself, and despite my racing heartbeat—or possibly at least partly because of it—I'm kind of turned on by this. The heat, the weight, the urgency in his need, all those are fighting with my keen awareness of his emotional state, his need for some kind of sympathy and closure.

I'm not sure that sex is the right thing to happen right at this point. But I'm not sure it'd be good for me to stop it, either.

"Fox," he growls in my ear, and the word is angry, and pleading, all in one.

It stops me. Okay, he's drunk—I hope he didn't drive—but he's asking, not taking. I hate feeling like I'm not in control, but being in a relationship is like that; sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow. I know he's just been through a wrenching experience. I *know* this. Dev knows where he wants to go, and his need for me is greater than my need for control.

My train of thought is cut short by the almost-slick-enough length pressing against my rear, finding the right spot on the third jab, and pushing in. I inhale, hold my breath, and steady myself so he can thrust forward.

He's not waiting for me to be set. His first thrust unbalances me as I was trying to lift myself up, toppling me awkwardly onto my broken paw. I bite back a yelp, more of surprise than pain, and steady myself on my elbows. When I'm stable, I close my eyes and lift my nose.

His scent is easy to pick out through the alcohol. The rich feline aroma obscures the worry, lets me relax around him, makes the fucking more enjoyable for me. There's no way I'm getting a paw down to my cock now, pressed hard into the bed, so I'll just ride it out and finish myself later.

With my elbows planted in the bed, I can protect my paw and

brace my hips at the same time. He's drunk, yeah, and his hips are thrusting pretty hard against mine, but he's being careful. His rough familiar hardness sinks all the way in as his arm slides under me and he grips my chest. And then I feel hot breath on my scruff, and he grabs it in his teeth.

He's done that before, when we played rough, but in this context it feels more serious. I bristle instinctively, then relax under the force of his desire. Whatever he needs from me, whatever I can do for him. So I let my head go limp, keeping my body tight as he drives under my tail.

His body is shuddering already from the need for release. His pants through my fur become moans, higher than normal. Whines, almost, as if the pressure inside him is escaping in short bursts. But it's building faster than it escapes. It bunches the muscles in his arm, around my chest. It drives me into the mattress with the force of his thrusts. The breath from his nose is like steam on my neck; his legs a vise around mine; his fingers clamps on my fur.

I don't try to think about what's driving him. I just keep my eyes shut and lose myself in his desire, his urgency, his passion. He needs this release, yes, but more, he needs it with me. So I brace myself, I take his weight, I take him in.

He huffs more urgently into my fur. His chest vibrates against my back with growls. His cock sinks in, pulls out, sinks in, faster, faster, harder, deeper. I grasp the wrist of the arm that's holding me. Hot breath soaks my neck fur. It's a little hard to breathe now, between his shuddering body and the hard bed. But he's close, he's close, he's close...

He's close for a long time. Frustration creeps into his tone; he changes his rhythm slightly. I try to help, angling my hips, clenching around him. He brings his other paw to his muzzle, lets go of my scruff to spit in it again, takes hold of my neck as he slickens himself.

That does it. When he fills me again, slick and hard, his moans get deeper, his hips slam faster into me. I feel it too, hard and

rubbing into the mattress, but I'm focused on him, letting him go, letting him take me.

He does. The growl builds in his chest, a living thing coiling to spring, rattling his body around me, leaping at his throat with a moan, driving his hips under my tail, tensing his muscles. I can feel it trying to get out, can feel a similar beast stirring in me in response. Mine is just waking; Dev's is fully animated, slamming at the prison of his body until it breaks out, through his throat, through his shaft, in moans so loud he has to let go of me to give voice to them, in a spasming, jerking release that drives his hardness deep inside me.

He shudders, clenches and shakes. I exhale, remembering to breathe. Wow. I can't stop myself from smiling. My tail shivers against his stomach, like a conduit through which pleasure passes from him to me. Just a little, only an echo of what he's feeling, but enough to make me giddy for a moment.

His muzzle comes to rest between my ears. His weight presses down. I feel his panting breaths on my head fur, his trembling afterglow down my back and inside me, where his cock spasms and then lies still. The joining there is a blur of heat and pleasure.

I stroke his wrist with my fingers. Seconds drag into minutes. He doesn't move, not much. I don't want to disturb him, but I'm dying to talk to him more. And of course, I've got my own need pressing into the mattress.

His arm remains around me, holding me. If he were angry, surely he'd roll over and walk away. Surely.

In the end, it's a harder thing for me to be quiet for ten minutes than for me to let him physically dominate me. "Dev?" I say it quietly.

He exhales into my fur, by way of response. I rub my fingers along his wrist. "We're gonna be okay," I say.

I don't mean it as a question, but it comes out that way, high on the last word. He exhales again, and speaks. "Don't you ever go anywhere."

I squirm, just a little. I weigh whether levity is appropriate. “Can I go to the bathroom?”

He shifts atop me, but doesn’t roll off. “Do you need to?”

“No.”

Slowly, he pulls himself out of me. I take a breath as some of his weight rises from my back. “I don’t hate you.”

“That’s good.” I roll onto my side. Our eyes meet. There’s a long, quiet moment where we just lie there, close, gold looking into blue. Then he leans forward, wincing slightly, and kisses the tip of my muzzle. I start to say something else, but he pushes me onto my back. One paw pins my chest down while the other cups my sheath and draws hard fingers up my erection.

“You don’t—”

“Hush.”

“I can do it—”

“Doc,” he says, and now I have no fucking idea how drunk he is or is not. He leans his massive body forward and takes the tip of my shaft between his lips. I shudder at the exquisite touch, the warmth and pressure, and I stare up at the ceiling. His paw holds me to the bed and his lips hold me in place, not moving, just staying there. I’m already hard, but the tension of anticipation swells my knot, until I can feel the blood pounding in it. My toes and tail twitch, my fingers dig into the bedsheets, and I want him to lower his muzzle and get to it. But I keep quiet. I can take the teasing a little longer. If that’s what it is.

He releases my shaft and sits back. I turn my head to look at him, without trying to resist his paw, but he’s not looking at me. “Sorry,” he mumbles, and the paw still gripping my shaft slides up and down.

“It’s...ahh...okay...” I squirm as his strokes grow more insistent, the pads sliding easily over my skin even without lube, each stroke a burst of tingling pleasure in me.

He doesn’t respond, just keeps his paw moving in a nice, steady rhythm, and it doesn’t take much. Pressure pounds at my knot,

surges of pleasure shake my tail and feet. I allow myself some moans, because it feels good, and hell, if anyone's listening, they've already heard Dev for sure. I grab at his shoulder with one paw, gripping the muscle through his shirt, panting faster, moaning, and I feel it all crest and break as my hips jerk, climax shooting through me.

Warm splatters land on my chest and stomach. I buck upwards over and over. Dev keeps pumping, slowing and then stopping as I drop back to the bed, panting. He keeps his paw there, but lifts the one on my chest. His fingers trace my knot.

I don't feel like getting up just yet. I do scooch closer to him on the bed, resting my head on the curl of his tail and looking up at the broad slope of his back. His fingers slide from my knot to my sac, down to my thighs, and back to rest on my knot. I slide my fingers from his shoulder down his side, catching in the cloth of his shirt.

Slowly, he unfastens his shirt with his other paw. The energy of sex has gone wherever those things go, out into heat and noise and the warm night air, leaving the room quiet and still. Outside, I can hear the drone of insects and traffic. Close to him, I can smell his anger and fear, even over the thick musky smell from my sticky fur. And as he removes his shirt, there's a trace of something else, something medicinal that makes my whiskers shiver even before he pulls his shirt off and I see the brace around his chest.

I reach up, touch its smooth, warm surface just as he unbuckles it and tosses it to the floor. Below it, his fur is matted down. I run claws across the stripes, scratching lightly and lifting the fur. He lets out a long sigh and lets me.

"Ribs?" I say softly.

He nods. I keep the caresses light. "You'll be okay for next week?" He nods again.

I know we should shower, but he doesn't seem to want to move any more than I do. The stillness is reassuring, but it also worries me. If his father really did make good on his threat to cut Dev out

of the family, then how long will it take before resentment starts to creep in on us? Is this quiet moment something I should savor?

I savor every quiet moment I get with him. Our relationship is so tumultuous that any little island of peace is welcome.

My knot's starting to go down. He curls his paw around it and slides his fingers all the way up my erection. I give him a satisfying jump. He turns, one golden eye catching mine. I think he's smiling, just a little. His shoulder's right at his mouth line and I can't quite tell, but his eyes aren't grim. I don't stop scratching his back.

"Wanna hop in the shower?" I say finally.

"Mm." His muzzle doesn't move; his shoulder still hides his mouth. "Is it big enough?"

"No."

He gives my shaft a long, warm squeeze with his paw, and then sits up, holding his paw out in front of him. Damp streaks glisten on it, echoes of the dampness on my stomach. He looks down with both eyes, and he is smiling. Just a bit.

I drift on the edge of sleep while he showers. The post-orgasmic glow keeps me warm, though it's not enough to dispel the worries about Dev and his family. *My dad hates me because of you*. I can dance around those words as much as I like, can point out that it's his dad's decision to act the way he is, but my broken paw cuts both ways. Yes, his father's violent and over-reacting. But I pushed him, and though I wasn't doing it to get this reaction—far from it—I was pushing for something, anything to resolve the problem. And now it's resolved, and even though I wasn't physically at the restaurant tonight, I can't deny my part in what happened.

I scratch under my cast as far as I can reach, and then leave it alone. We'll deal with those thoughts tomorrow. For now, I guess he got what he needed. He came to me, and stayed with me. He told me not to go anywhere. That glow outlasts any trifling climax.

The water stops. I sit up on the bed. Out he comes, stretching a towel across his shoulders, rubbing back and forth. The smells of wet fur and cheap shampoo drift across the room.

I stand, shaking my pants free from my ankles. He steps back against the door to let me into the bathroom. At the bathroom door, I pause to look up at him. He looks gravely back, then leans over to touch his nose to mine.

I shower quickly, keeping my tail dry and just washing under it and down my front. The shampoo leaves my fur feeling grainy and rough. It takes me a long time and two of their cheap towels to get from wet down to damp, and when I get back out into the room, Dev is sprawled out on one side of the bed, naked and asleep. So I shut my computer down and crawl into bed next to him. Our fur is that familiar damp that we've pressed together a hundred times, clean from the shower, only he's not lying on his side, so I can't really spoon. I lie next to him and rest my paw on his side. He hasn't put his brace back on. That's okay. I'll help him with it tomorrow.

I FORGET about the brace and nearly trip over it getting out of bed in the morning. Dev's still asleep, though he's on his side now, facing the window. I hit the bathroom, decide it's not worth putting on clothes yet, and sit down to my computer. I have some reports to finish up from the weekend, so I busy myself with those.

For a break, I check Dev's e-mail. I delete the harangues and skim over the sympathy, encouragement, and nonsensical Internet messages. No more messages from gay college football players. There are a few, bland and guarded, from some other pro players. "Good for you." "See you on the field," which I pause over, wondering if it's a subtle pickup line. I note the player's name and move on.

As much as this outing has shaken both our private worlds, it remains to be seen what effect it will have in the world at large. No other gay players have come out. The flurry of articles has died down. His teammates have, more or less, come to grips with it. We

still get letters from fans, still see comments in sports forums and gay forums, but the excitement has died down. All that's left now is our private drama: our families and my job.

"Anything good?" Dev rumbles, behind me.

I turn in the chair. He's propped up on his elbow, his other paw lying on his ribcage. His eyes are clear in the dim light. "How's your head?" I ask.

"Sore." He drops his eyes. "How's your...?"

I shift on the seat. "Fine." I try a smile. "Takes a lot more than that to leave me sore. Well," I amend, when he raises an eyebrow, "maybe not a *lot* more. But I'm fine."

His lips twitch. "Sorry," he says.

"You don't have to—"

"Everything's such a mess." He starts talking a second after I reply. "Don't know what I'm going to do."

"I do. You're going to play football."

"I mean, about—"

I lean forward in the chair. "I know what you mean," I say softly. "You're going to play football. Because you're good at that, you can control it, you can help the team win." Also, because maybe if he keeps playing well, that'll win his father's respect? I don't know.

He nods, maybe thinking the same thing. Then he says, "But I don't know what we're going to do *today*."

He's still not smiling. I stare into his eyes and then slide off the chair, padding to stand by the bed. "Are you okay? You're not more upset?"

He shakes his head slowly. "Like, what?"

"I dunno. I would've expected you to be hitting or throwing things."

"Did that last night." He growls, and presses a paw to his forehead. "That's one thing we have to do today."

"What?"

"I need a new phone."

I laugh softly and sit down next to him. “Break it at the restaurant? Or throw it out the car window?”

“Restaurant called me a taxi.” He closes his eyes. “Called Gregory. He was an ass. I threw the phone out the window.”

“Why did you—”

“Mom didn’t pick up.”

I place a paw on his thigh, just above his knee. “Okay. But first, we’re going to get you something for that hangover.”

“Uh-huh.” He reaches out, resting a paw on my thigh. My upper thigh. An inch from my balls. “And then?”

I flick my ears forward. He’s erect, half out of his sheath. “You’re in the mood again? Already?”

His finger teases my sheath, stirring excitement there. “You’re not?”

I don’t want to break the mood—I can feel us heading toward another nice, hot, panting climax, this time maybe without the threat of me being suffocated—but I can’t keep the question in. “You don’t hate me?”

His finger stops. He frowns, looking up. “Because,” I say, “I know you’re thinking it. You said it.”

“I said I hate you?” The frown deepens. “I don’t remember that.”

“You said your father walked out because of me.”

His ears lift. “Oh. Well.” His finger starts stroking me again. “He did.”

“So…”

“Fox,” he says, “I don’t know if I have much of a family anymore. What kind of idiot would I be to walk away from the only person I do have left?”

Warmth bursts through me. I want to fall on him and hug him, but I just let the emotion stretch my mouth into a goofy smile. “You’ve got the team.”

“I can’t fuck the team,” he says.

I lean forward. “Oh, you think you just fuck me, is that it?”

His eyes gleam. “Well, doc, what would you call it?”

“I’d say I *let* you fuck me.”

“You would, would you?” His paw closes around my sheath and protruding shaft.

I hold my ground. “I would.” The only advantage I have is that I’m kneeling over him. That, plus his hangover, but that’s not fair.

He purrs softly. “You figure out what to call it. I’ll just do it.” His paw squeezes.

I gasp. He’s all the way hard now, too. I reach down and grasp his shaft in return. “We still don’t have any lube.”

His grin shows white teeth in the dim room. “That a problem?” His thumb teases my tip, as his tongue curls out and over his lips, licking slowly, meaningfully.

I squirm and arch my back, closing my eyes. “Not for me.”

ONCE WE’RE both clean and significantly more damp, we walk back to his place. The restaurant didn’t actually make provisions to return his car, so we take a taxi down. I ask if he wants me to wait at his place while he gets his car, gets a phone, all those things he has to do in public. He only pauses a moment, pulling on a clean shirt. “Fuck that,” he says. “You’re leaving tonight. Long as we don’t start jerking each other off in the cab.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” I say, “but I’m not sure I could manage it.”

I wink, and that makes him stop, and I know he’s thinking maybe I’m suggesting we try. But even though I can still get him for a moment, he knows me well enough that his eyebrows lower, his mouth relaxes into a smile, and his tail starts swaying back and forth again. “Then I guess it’s safe. You want to get in a dress?”

He’s asking, not telling. I start to say yes, and then stop and think. Who’d recognize me? Things are getting quieter out there, and I’m in Chevali, hundreds of miles from where I live and work.

Brian isn't going to leap out from the shadows with a cell phone camera. And I know Kinnel isn't looking to publish my identity. Yet. I'd love to go out and just be myself with my tiger.

True, people might look twice, seeing Dev out with another guy. There'd be rumors that maybe he was dating a fox. And the one day I don't dress up is the day someone would recognize him and snap a cell phone pic to send to the papers. Would it be worth it? Does it really matter to him what I wear?

I'm talking myself back into the disguise. So I nod. I take fifteen minutes to put on my feminine musk, the fake chest, and a simple dress. I smooth the dress down over my stomach, adjust the waist over my hips. They're a little too narrow, but my tail keeps everything in place just fine.

I look at myself in the mirror: a young, moderately attractive vixen. In the stark reality of his family's—his father's—assholery, the disguise feels more fake than usual. I feel like by hiding, we're proving his father at least partly right, that there is something wrong with what we're doing.

Silly, I tell the vixen in the mirror. This is as much me as when I'm in regular clothes. We've gone out like this a thousand times. I'm showing him that nothing's different, that nothing's changed, that I'm still here for him.

Nothing's different. Nothing's changed. That's what he wants to hear, isn't it? That's what he needs to hear. That'll take away that cloud over his head.

I've been staring at myself for five minutes. I smooth the wrinkles down in the dress one more time. I brush a light coating of eyeliner on. All the trappings are in place.

When I walk out, Dev pauses to look at me. For a moment, I'm seized with the urge to run back into the bedroom, take the dress off, and put my jeans on again. Then he takes my paw.

Restaurant first, to get his car. The parking lot is almost empty. Nobody sees us.

We drive to a phone store in an outdoor mall, where Dev

magically gets helped ahead of the two other people waiting. The coyote who greets us perks his ears way up when he sees Dev. Leaving the person he's helping to run over, he says, "Mister Miski!" His eyes flick briefly in the direction of the other customers, and he adds, "Welcome back! What have you decided on?"

That doesn't really convince the other customers, and it confuses Dev, but I nudge him to go along with it and he does. Later, when the yote is getting Dev's phone from the back, I explain it to him. "Oh," he says. "I thought he really remembered me. I got a phone here two times ago."

"You don't destroy phones that often." I smile around at an impala couple who just walked in with their eight-year-old son. He is gawping at Dev.

"People remember me sometimes." He looks away from the impalas.

Whether it's the sight of the family, or the coyote's false recognition, Dev gets quiet then. The coyote comes back with a new phone and a request for Dev to tell his teammates about the store. Dev nods, holding the next-gen smartphone awkwardly. I promise to help him figure out how it works, with a wink at the coyote.

We walk by the impalas as we're leaving. The son is still staring up at Dev. I wait for Dev to react; when he doesn't, I tug on his sleeve. He waits as I crouch down to the fawn. "You recognize him?"

Wide eyes shift to me. "I'm sorry if he's bothering you," the father says.

"It's okay," Dev says, and starts to leave, but I don't follow him. He takes one step and then stops, folding his arms.

"No bother at all, dear." I give the fawn a nice smile. "You know who he is, right?"

He nods, slowly. "He's a Firebird," he says. "Nummer fi'ty-se'en."

“Fifty-seven, that’s right.” I smile. “What’s your name? You want an autograph?”

“It’s very kind of you,” the father says, as the fawn says, “Ricardo.”

I stand and fish around in my purse for a piece of paper. “It’s no trouble,” I say, handing a little notebook to Dev to sign. “No trouble at all.”

Dev gives me a tired look, but signs the notebook. I tear the page out and hand it to Ricardo. We leave the pup clutching the precious paper in his hands, the parents saying “thank you” over and over, the father with his own autograph. “Lucky I didn’t get mobbed,” Dev says. But he doesn’t sound grateful, or sorry; the words feel empty, said by rote.

“We don’t have much left to do today anyway.” It’s not hard to put some cheer in my voice. The sun’s out and there are a lot of people on this shopping street. My nose twitches, taking in all the scents. Everybody’s smiling, probably because the daytime highs are below 100 for the first time in six months. It’s the kind of day where just being out with Dev can set my tail to wagging, but Dev doesn’t look like he’s seeing any of it. I cast about for some way to distract him. “Take a girl to lunch?”

He glances up at the storefront and gestures to the closest place to get food, a Wrap Party. “That okay?”

“Sure.” The wag in my tail falters, only for a moment. “Can we take them to the park? It’ll be pretty there and not too crowded.”

He doesn’t quite say, “Whatever,” but it feels like he has. I lift my muzzle and stay perky. For him.

Half an hour later we’re unwrapping our lunches on a park bench in front of a row of cacti and decorative rocks. “So,” I say, “what happened?”

He slumps, just a bit. “I told you. My father kicked me out.”

Delicacy is required here. “What did you say?”

“Look, doc....”

“Okay. What did *he* say?”

“You know.” He stares at the ground in front of him. “Told me to give you up. Don’t bother coming home ’til I do.”

I feel a chill, and my paw clenches hard around my sandwich. God damn Mikhail. “What did you say that made him walk out?” He just shakes his head. “You wish you could take it back?”

“No.” He says it low, but firmly.

My Mediterranean wrap is dripping over my paw. I loosen my grip “Mind if I come down for Thanksgiving?”

With one paw to his side, he takes a bite, chews, and swallows. “I’ll probably just stick around here. That’s our Monday night game against Pelagia. I could use the practice.”

I can see the outline of the brace under his shirt. I grope for reassuring words.“I know you don’t want to talk about it, but just listen.” He stares down at his plain turkey wrap. “This isn’t going to last. I can promise you that. Back in my activist days I heard dozens of stories of kids getting estranged from their families. It happens in the heat of the moment, and once the family realizes how much they miss the kid, they work something out. I won’t lie. It might take years. But it’s not forever.”

He grunts an unconvincing, “I know.”

“Maybe there’s someone who can talk to your dad for you. You said you grew up around the auto shop, right? One of those guys, one of your neighbors, high school friends?”

He snorts. “It’s none of their business.”

“You could tell them.”

“You don’t understand how our family works.”

“Then someone in the family. A relative, an aunt or uncle—”

“Doc,” he says, all quiet, “I already told you I love you. I ain’t gonna leave you.”

“I know. I just need you to know. It’ll get better.” I can feel the words falling short, like long passes clunking to the ground. But it’s not the end of the game. There’s no timekeeper counting down to zero.

“Does it still help if I don’t believe it?”

There's no life in his tail. He's just picking at his lunch. I swallow, holding back the surge of anger. If his father were here right now I would kick him in the teeth. "Yeah. It does."

We sit like that for several heartbeats. Then he curls a paw behind my head and leans down to kiss me, softly. "Thanks, doc."

He's smiling, but the sadness in his eyes grips my heart like a vise.

WHAT I DIDN'T TELL Dev is that a lot of times, it is forever. The parents don't come around, and the kid realizes he's better off without them—or doesn't. Whether the split happens in a dramatic scene in a restaurant or simply over a protracted period of less and less connection, it doesn't matter. A lot of times, they reconcile. A lot of times, they don't.

If nobody does anything, if they all just let the situation lie and nobody tries, then inertia takes over. You get used to not talking to your family, you forget why you valued them as you build other bonds. Eventually you're left with just a little numbness when you see other happy families, when friends talk about their awesome parents.

Me, I'm okay. Sure, once in a while I think it'd be great to have a family. But as far as Dev feels from his, I'm way more remote from mine, and I've grown to accept it. Dev might, but it'll take longer. And it'll take a lot out of him. I don't think Mikhail's plan will work—I believe Dev when he says he won't leave me to go back to his family. But I can see how his ache, his sadness will become a sore spot between us.

That sadness is what consumes me at the airport gate, waiting for my delayed flight. My cast itches like hell, and the more I think about the look in Dev's eyes, the faster I pace back and forth. A tiger in an elegant blue suit walks by on his way to another gate; for a moment I picture Dev's father, and my paw tries to curl into a

fist.

There has to be something I can do. There just has to be. First he fucks up my thumb, then he kicks Dev out. He thinks he can just do whatever the fuck he wants. Well, he can't push us around, not like this. I need to make this better. I need to do *something*.

Sure, he's got the physical edge on me, but I'm better with words. I could take him apart logically, dislocate his arguments with sarcasm, pierce him with wit. The problem with that is that logic, sarcasm, and wit are useless against emotion. All I'd do is make him lose his temper and come at me. Or hang up, if I do the smart thing and call him on the phone. Smart, here, is a relative term.

Maybe I could talk to Duscha, even if Dev won't. Problem one: I don't have the number. Problem two: I don't feel like being charming. Problem three: I don't think that would help anyway. I need to talk to someone, though, to get some of this out of my system. I call Salim, but he's not picking up his phone again. I scroll through the other numbers on my phone. Alex doesn't know about Dev. Neither do my other friends. My father...not right now. So I walk to the window, away from most of the people waiting, and call Aunt Carolyn.

"They kicked him out," I growl when she picks up.

"Just like that? Was there a scene? Were you there? Are you okay?"

"No, I was—I'm fine. His father's like this primitive tribal chief or something. Lord of his little family kingdom."

"The mother's okay with it?"

"I think so. She seems to like me. But she doesn't have any say."

"Don't underestimate the female influence. How's your tiger taking it?"

I stare out the window at the airplanes. "Dev loves his family. They don't deserve it. They don't deserve him. But he loves them."

"Maybe he should call another press conference, tell the world he still loves his family. Or is he not that much of a drama queen?"

“He’s not any kind of drama queen.”

I still love her laugh. It’s melodic and reassuring. Usually it can make me smile. “I suppose that’s best. Two in a relationship would be a little much.”

“Did you ever want to punch your mother?”

“More times than I can count. But it was much more satisfying to send her pictures of me with my ne’er-do-well boyfriends. That’s what she hated most of all: her daughters consorting below their ‘station’.”

I pause. “I could send his father a picture of him in a cheerleader’s outfit.”

Even her surprised half-laugh is musical. I tell her about the prank his teammates played, and she demands that we bring the picture when we come visit. Because that’s the Sunday before Thanksgiving, our conversation turns to the holiday.

“You should call Bren.”

I turn to face the corner of the window and wall. “I talked to Father already. Dev can’t come home with me for Thanksgiving.”

“Not for that. Just for ideas.”

“Why? Did his parents fuck him over because he wasn’t straight?”

She laughs. “Tell me when you get to Port City. I’ll make reservations at that Sikh place. I need to get going. Tell your boy family is overrated.”

I don’t think that would work. And I can’t think what my father could say that would help. He does deal with Mother and her weird neuroses, and maybe Mikhail’s clinging to his image of his son isn’t so far off from Mother’s desperate attempts to live in the past. But if Dev’s father doesn’t have any respect for a faggot, he’s sure not going to respect any guy who lets his son be a faggot.

I slump into a chair next to a vixen reading a trashy romance. Amusingly, she has pants on, while I’m still wearing my dress. Putting my feet up on my carry-on bag, I hatch elaborate fantasies of driving up to Lake Handerson, waiting ’til Mikhail goes to the

auto shop, and then winning Duscha over to my side. She'd confide in me some athletic challenge that would make Mikhail respect me. He wouldn't believe I could do it. I'd bet him that I could, the stakes being Dev's return to the family. I wouldn't even toss acceptance of me in. And then I'd make it, and Mikhail would be so impressed he would invite me anyway.

Or else I just go to the auto shop and beat the shit out of him in front of the co-workers he's so desperate to look good for. That feels a good deal more satisfying than my after-school special fantasy. I even incorporate some irony, using my cast to deliver the knockout blow.

As foolish as it is, the fantasy makes me stretch my arms. I stand up, walking away from the vixen and her trashy romance. Near the windows again, I run through some aikido moves as much as I can without drawing attention to myself. It's been years since I took a class, but I remember it pretty well. It's a good discipline to help us smaller types deal with larger opponents. With nothing to lose, now, I wouldn't hold back on Mikhail. Of course, aikido is designed to get you out of fights, not into them.

I get too careless, lose track of where I am. My cast bangs into the back of one of the chairs, sending a twinge of reality up my arm. I massage my paw pad, as much as I can reach. The frustration of my impotence makes me kick the chair back, earning me glares from the surrounding passengers at the gate: *chill out, crazy vixen.* I stare back until they look away.

I think of Mikhail and his auto shop, the community in which he's so worried about people knowing his son is gay. How would he feel if a little fox came and beat him up in front of all of them? Or, more realistically, if I sent them all a picture of his son in a cheerleader's outfit? Hell, I bet he hasn't even told them he kicked Dev out.

They announce that the plane's almost ready to board, finally. I assume that's what they announce, because I miss the actual words, busy turning that last thought over in my head. I bet he

hasn't told them. Why would he? Family's business stays in the family, he says. Dev as much as told me that, too. That's why Mikhail can do whatever he wants. There's nobody to judge him, nobody to put pressure on him or make him feel guilty or embarrassed about his Neanderthal behavior.

Well, now. *That* I can do something about. I take out the cell phone, anger changing to excitement.

Fortunately, the swift fox answers, just as first class is boarding, a small group of eight. "I've got my laptop open. Can I record this?"

"I don't have much time, Mister Kinnel. I'm not calling to tell you my story."

He sighs. "You don't have to do the voice."

"Force of habit."

"Are you wearin' the dress?"

"Of course." They finish boarding first class. "Listen, do you have connections with regional papers, like around Gateway, Hilltown?"

Some clicks of the keyboard. "I can find 'em. But I ain't going to dig up anything without—"

I turn toward the window, speaking low and fast. "I thought some of them might be interested in a story. About a gay football player whose bigoted father kicked him out."

His tone changes. "Yeah?"

They start to board the main cabin. My row isn't boarding yet, but it'll be in the next group called. "He flew down to Chevali. I just think some of the regional papers up there might be interested. Local family drama."

"Probably not," he says. "Maybe some of those papers still have society pages. But what happened?"

"That's all I know."

"Got a quote from Miski?"

"No." I pause. "Well. He said, 'I still love my family, no matter what.'" That oughta play well up in the Midwest.

“Anything else? I need more than that.” Rustling as he changes position. “C’mon, I went to the post-game and asked ’bout his kick blocking play so the writers’d notice. Did you see that?”

“That was you? All right, there was an argument at a Sonoran restaurant. Mister Kinnel, I have to go.”

He’s already typing, muttering something to himself about the number of Sonoran restaurants. “Sure, okay. Listen, I’ll call you after you land, ’kay?”

“Sure.” I hang up and turn off the phone, and get ready to board.

I have to admit that this definitely qualifies as pushing, but I couldn’t just fly home, go to work, and act as if nothing’s wrong. My thumb still aches, and if nothing else, the bastard deserves to be made to squirm a bit. Anyone who would reject a son who needs him deserves whatever happens to him. Anyone who hurts Dev deserves whatever I can do to him.

ALEX TRIES to lord it over me at work, crowing about Dev’s injury. “I’m so gonna win that lunch from you,” he says.

“They didn’t target him because he’s gay,” I point out. “They targeted him because he was trying to make an open-field tackle.”

“They isolated him. Look at the play they were running.”

We have all the film, so it’s easy to call it up and spend fifteen minutes arguing over whether the Tornadoes ran plays specifically to get Dev one-on-one with Bixon. I don’t see it; Alex does. I can’t tell him that Dev told me about the after-game handshakes, that everything was cool. It’s still an enjoyably trivial football-geek argument, marred only by having to watch Dev get pancaked over and over.

We—the Dragons—won this weekend, only the second time all year, so that makes everyone pretty happy. Chatter in the office is about the players who stepped up, because as the team’s

confidence in various players changes over the year, our scouting assignments change. Suddenly a new left tackle is less important; we can focus on our need at center. If the center steps up his game, we can look for a tight end to jump in priority.

The changing assignments bring some frustration. Just because Kingsley did well this week doesn't mean we don't need to replace him; just because Forsyth did poorly doesn't mean we do need to replace *him*. But that's the way the ownership thinks, which at least partly why the Dragons have been terrible for the better part of a decade now. A team based on snap judgments will lose, 99% of the time, to one with more objective evaluation and a long-term plan. Morty's trying to change the culture, but he can only do so much.

Halloween comes and goes; I pass out candy from my apartment to the few cubs and kids that come by, talk to Dev on the phone, and get ready to fly off to another round of games. The flood of e-mails to Dev's box has slowed now that he's not the top story in the media. He tells me he's still getting sponsorship offers, none as urgent as the Ultimate Fit line in terms of getting commercials out, but a few that are advertising in gay papers and gay neighborhoods. "Focus on football," I remind him, and he says yeah, whatever Ogleby can sign with stock photos, he's approving; anything that needs his participation waits until after the season.

He's still subdued. I'm gentle with him all week, and I don't mention Kinnel. I meant to, the first night on the phone, but he sounded so down that I decided to wait until I could tell him in person. The article hasn't been published anywhere I've heard of yet, which is good because I'm getting uneasy crawls through my fur when I think of it. More and more, I have to talk myself into believing it was the right thing to do.

Dev and I don't talk about his family at all, in fact, though it shadows everything we say. I can feel his heartache even though I don't miss my own family. I know how I'd feel if Dev left me, though. It's not the same, but he's my family, so it's as close as I

can get.

Thursday night I'm sitting alone in the apartment after an early call with Dev, looking out into the space between the buildings across the street. Hilltown in late fall is not as pretty as some of the cities I visit; the downtown, where I live, is all twenty-to-thirty-year-old concrete apartment blocks with some older brick houses dotted where the plots don't quite line up.

I live on the second floor of one of those, a converted house that at least doesn't smell of mildew. Mostly it smells of me, whatever quick meal I was cooking, and, if I stray into the corners, of the vixen who was the previous resident. It's hard to stay out of the corners of the eight by ten kitchen, or the ten by ten bedroom. My bed is a loft I have to scramble over my old college desk to get up to; the living room, not much larger, has my old sofa-bed but no room to fold it out unless I move the TV.

I'm at my desk looking out at the narrow balconies, the buildings streaked with dark, damp stains. Streetlights flicker across the skeletons of trees. When the snow comes, things will be more lively, but right now it's cold and it's lonely. It makes me think of Dev, down there in Chevali, and how alone he feels.

That I can sympathize with. After Brian was attacked, when I started dating Dev, I drifted away from my other college friends. My visits home became perfunctory ritual, filled with the same home movies and inanities. Then we fought over me not graduating, which I've never really forgiven them for. Have they forgiven me, though? It's hard to tell. I haven't talked to Mother since Christmas.

Aunt Carolyn thought I could talk to Father. Maybe if I don't mention Thanksgiving, he'll have some perspective. Tomorrow might be better to call, though. My mind will still be filled with colleges and football and Dev, but I'll be in a hotel room rather than my cramped, lonely apartment.

Then again, I know I have time now. If I'm going to do it, I might as well do it. It's only a bit after nine. They'll be up.

My father sounds surprised when he picks up the phone. I start with small talk, how's he doing, how's the business, all that. His voice sounds echoey, so I ask if he's in the basement.

"I was practicing pool," he says. "Your mother has some people over."

"Mrs. Jess and Nathan?"

"No."

"Some other vixen with a ten-year-old cub she can dote on?"

He sighs. "What's on your mind?"

I lean against the chilly window. His voice is weirdly flat, but I don't follow it up. "You never told me about your sister."

"Marina? I haven't talked to her in years. Since before you were born."

I imagine him in the pool room, leaning against the table, maybe sitting in one of the armchairs. I brush my tail idly past the backs of my legs. "Aunt Carolyn said the family kicked her out."

"Grandma did. Your grandma, I mean. Didn't take to the desert fox. I forget his name now. Hari?" He pauses. I hear the scratch of his claws through his cheek fur. "Why?"

What the hell am I doing, asking my father for advice on getting another father to reconcile with *his* son? I almost say, "No reason," and hang up. Almost—if I hadn't just talked to Dev and heard that same oppressive weight on him he's had since Sunday. He needs me.

"Dev's parents—his father—told him not to come home again." Father doesn't say anything. "Until he stops seeing me."

He's still quiet. I regret the foolish rush of emotion, like asking about Thanksgiving. This silence reminds me of that one. I brace myself. "Father?"

I can hear him breathing. He exhales slowly, and says one of the last things I'd expect. "Do you want to get a drink?"

There's a bar near my place we both know. I bundle up and walk down the street, ears flat against the cold breeze, thinking about my father. I've known him for twenty-some years. I never

really talked to him about being gay. I figured it out on my own, sitting in my bedroom jerking off under the covers. I can still remember the Abercrombie catalog, of all things, the slender fox in the tighty whities I was looking at when I had the burst of realization: this is how I'm different.

There was no way I could tell my parents, not outright. I wasn't worried they'd throw me out; I'd just grown used to all of us having our own private lives. So instead, I came home from college my freshman year with gay literature and gay posters and a jacket with a pink triangle patch on it, and dared them to bring it up. Mother never did; Father only made oblique references to my "lifestyle." But I never asked them to meet a boyfriend, not until after Dev walked over that day in the restaurant and introduced himself.

Which was pretty ballsy of him, and more than he ever did with his parents. I only talked to him a few times about when he'd come out to them. Later, later, he always said, and he'd change the subject. And I, knowing how hard it was for me, let him. For all the times I pushed him, nudged him, annoyed him about football or about our relationship, I never brought up family. I like to stick to my strengths.

My ears are freezing by the time I get to Ranger Rob's. The bar's run by a big ol' wolf who claims to have fought in any number of wars, depending on his mood and the number of beers he's got in him. He's not there much anymore, and he's not there tonight, but he still keeps the bar dim and smoke-free, to give himself a split-second advantage over non-canid intruders. You can take the soldier off the battlefield, but you can't take the battlefield out of the soldier.

I find a booth in a corner and order a white wine. It's warm, at least, with soft yellow lighting off the dark wood paneling and the comforting smells of beer and nuts and other liquors. When my father took me out here for drinks, one time when he was visiting me at Forester, I was so nervous. I'd had plenty of beers, and wine,

but never with my father. And it was fine. He treated it like he treated everything: like it was no big deal. Then, that was great.

A young arctic fox in camo brings my wine. It's cold and sharp and not very good, but it settles the flutters in my stomach and the tension in my fingers. When my father walks in the door, I raise a paw casually.

He slides in across from me and orders a beer when the arctic fox saunters over with her order pad. She leaves. He and I sit and look at each other.

He looks heavier than I remember from Christmas. He's wearing a brown leather jacket over a plain yellow t-shirt, with the same glasses he's had for years. His eyes are bright and there's still not much grey on his muzzle, though there are patches on his ears. He doesn't use fur tint, though, not my father.

His eyes flick to my cast. "What'd you do to your paw?"

I move my other paw, nonsensically, to cover it. "Got in a fight."

He raises an eyebrow. "With a black marker gang? Can I see?"

Reluctantly, I lift the cast, extend it. He takes it gently, turns it to see the signatures. "Gerrard Marvell. Fisher Kingston. Wow. Your tiger didn't sign it?"

I pull the paw back, proud that he's impressed with it. "I didn't call you to talk about my paw," I say, which brings another moment of silence as we both contemplate the reason I did call him.

"Tough break," he says, finally, and then his beer arrives.

"Dislocation," I say, though I know he's not talking about my thumb.

He sips. "I guess it makes sense, though."

My ears flatten. "You don't even know them."

He gets close to a smile. "I mean, you meeting some other kid from a religious family."

I squint. "Since when are you religious?"

"I assumed his parents are."

“Not really, actually.” I lift the wine to my nose and inhale it before taking another sip. It smells better than it tastes, fruity and a little sharp. “His dad has this masculinity thing.”

“Most dads do, I think. Makes the whole ‘having cubs’ thing easier.”

“Assuming their partner has the ‘female’ thing.”

He inclines his head. “You thinking about having cubs?”

“Not for a long time. If ever.” I sip the wine. “And who knows how long things will last.”

“Because of this?” He keeps his paws around the beer mug, watching me steadily. “Would he choose his family over you?”

I sigh. “I don’t think so, but...” It feels odd talking about this with my father, almost as if I’d sought out advice from a stranger in the bar. “He’s just down all the time. I’m doing what I can, but I feel like if we don’t get him back with his family, things will just decay. We live apart, we only see each other weekends of home games. We have to sneak around all the time.” Just reciting our list of woes sends crawls of worry around my heart, or maybe that’s just the cheap wine. I think about going on to mention being in drag all the time, but then I’m not sure that counts because we both kind of enjoy it. Or did, until recently.

“Doesn’t sound like a great relationship anyway.” Father looks around the bar, at the coyotes at the next table and the wolves at the bar itself.

“It is.” Automatically defensive, I sit up straighter. “Look, I didn’t call you to be talked out of being gay.”

“Didn’t mean that.” He rubs a finger up and down his drink. “You had a lot of friends in college. Nothing worked out with them?”

“No. It’s different with Dev.”

“Is it the football?” He holds up a paw. “Sorry. I don’t really need to know.”

I shrug. “Maybe. It’s all wrapped up in that. We love the same things. We want the same things.”

His muzzle drops, a moment before he picks up his beer and drinks it. “That’s important.” His voice has that flat tone again, and his scent is subtly different, sinking into the smell of the old wood of the table.

An old army jacket hangs on the wall behind him, a relic from an old war, framed now by his ears. I move the wine away from me and lean forward. “What friends did Mother have over?”

“I thought we were talking about you.”

“We have a while.” I indicate his half-finished beer.

“Whatever your mother and I are going through—”

“Father…”

His eyes shift to the adjacent table. The coyotes are bickering amiably at the next table with the familiarity of a long-married couple. Father watches them and says, evenly, “An otter from Families United, another mother.”

The group name rings a faint bell. “What’s her name?”

Still looking at the coyotes, he says, “Mrs. Hedley. She says she lost her son to the homosexual agenda.”

My fur prickles. “Mother had her over?”

“Again.”

“How long has she been…?”

“The first time was a month ago.” He rests his muzzle on his paw, rubbing his whiskers with one finger. “She came away from that with all these ideas of literature to send you. That didn’t happen. God knows what’s going to happen after tonight. But you wanted to talk about Marina?”

Not any more, I don’t. I want to find out what’s going on with Mother. But Father clearly doesn’t want to discuss that. “So, ah, what happened with her?”

He straightens, gets back a wry smile. “I’m not sure how much help I’ll be. The family never reconciled with her. She’s still living with Hari, as far as I know, which isn’t far.”

“Did she do anything to make it worse? Did Grandma ever regret kicking her out?”

He lifts his mug to his muzzle, considers it, and laps one or two sips. “I don’t know. She never told me, if she did. But your grandma kept to herself. Marina was the youngest, and Grandma always said she took liberties. With me and Rob and Rog, she was more strict. Marina was the baby. I think that’s why Grandma took it so hard.”

“How did Marina tell her?”

“Partly,” he goes on as if I hadn’t spoken, “it was that Hari wasn’t a red. Partly it was that he was Arabic. Partly it was that Mother caught them kissing on the back porch.”

I can’t help asking. “Just kissing?”

“That’s what she told me. I’ve no idea what else they might have been doing while kissing, but she threw Hari out and told Marina never to bring him back.”

“And Marina said she wasn’t coming back either?”

He nods. “Actually, it was more like she just stopped talking to Mother. I don’t think there was ever a big fight about it. I wasn’t living at home, so I didn’t know until she called me.”

“Grandma?”

“Marina.”

Marina sounds like a character in a soap or a sitcom. I cup my ears forward and take another drink of wine as my father goes on. “She said she was running away with Hari and that she hated Mother—Grandma—and asked if I could loan her money to help her on her way.”

“Did you?”

His ears lower a little. “I tried to talk her out of it. I think I said something about her overreacting to Mother’s overreaction. I said Mother would let Hari back eventually. She’d liked him at first, when she thought he was just a friend. Marina said that she wouldn’t, that she would never approve.” He laps again at his beer. “Marina was right, it turns out, although I still say Mother would have let him back if Marina hadn’t run off. If she’d bothered to try to talk things out.”

I let the pointed reference sail over my head, between my upright ears. “Grandma never said anything to you about it?”

“Apart from prayers for ‘lost lambs,’ not much. When she started to…when we put her in the home, she talked about Marina, but it was always about when we were cubs, never Marina after high school.”

My grandmother, who always smelled like church to me, lived near Port City, in a big empty house. We spent little time with her in person: Christmases, my grandfather’s funeral when I was five or six. I never saw her in the home, except the one time my father took me to say good-bye to her. I was twelve, old enough to understand what was happening, but it was a very short visit. My mother whisked me out when Grandma started to ramble. She died a week later. I didn’t go to the funeral.

I finish my wine and run my finger around the rim of the glass. “What was Grandma like? Growing up?”

“She was a mother. Took care of us when my father was out at the bank ’til all hours.” He looks over his glasses. “How does his mother feel about you?”

And we’re back to Dev. “She’s okay with me. I think. We messed up a little bit, but—”

“Messed up? Like, criticized her cooking, or violated her guest room?”

My ears flush. “She doesn’t have the big issues. His father’s the one with the complex about fags.” I shift my broken paw.

He frowns, his eyes avoiding mine at the f-word. They light on my cast, and widen. “*He’s* who you got in the fight with?”

“It wasn’t a fight. Not really.”

“What, did you break your paw on his stone jaw?”

“Dislocated.” I snort and call for another wine, catching the arctic’s eye. “I didn’t throw a punch.”

“I’d hope I raised you better than that.”

“You certainly raised me not to get into fights.”

He flicks his left ear. “Did you file assault charges?”

My father and his great problem-solving skills. “No. Didn’t seem like the right way to get in good with the family.”

He leans closer, pushing his beer to the side. “So what happened?”

Keeping my voice low, I tell him about Mikhail’s threat, about our conversation and the snap of ligaments in my thumb. He doesn’t show much emotion when I get to that part. He frowns, again, touches his beer mug without lifting it. “You like to make things difficult for yourself,” he says when I’m done.

“Thanks,” I say, trying not to sound as cold as I feel. The arctic fox brings me another wine, which I drink from immediately. I’d thought this was going well, and it’s just coming back to the same old thing with him. “Just trying to roll with the changes, like you taught me.”

“Why couldn’t you just have been quiet?” He taps the mug, gives a half-smile. “I guess why start now, right?”

“Oh, you’re being judgmental. There’s no way I could have predicted that.”

“Wiley—”

“Maybe if I had a college degree, I’d be better able to handle these situations. Guess if I’d taken that last credit in ‘Dealing with bigots your boyfriend’s related to,’ I could’ve graduated and all this wouldn’t be a problem.”

His ears flatten. “I didn’t bring that up.”

“You would have. It was just a matter of time.” He doesn’t answer. I lean back and take another drink. “I just wanted some help.”

He spreads his black paws. I see grey on the pads, too. “What can I do? You want me to go talk to this guy, make him like you?”

“Could you?”

“I could try.”

Twenty years, and I still have trouble telling when he’s joking. “Seriously?”

Now, he takes a drink. He puts the mug down and points with

his nose at my cast. “Long as I’m not going to end up in the hospital with a broken paw.”

“Don’t call his son a cocksucker and you should be okay.”

His eyes widen for a moment. “And you argue when I say you make things difficult for yourself.”

“I wasn’t arguing. I was just saying it wasn’t very helpful to point out.”

He smiles, wryly. “I don’t think I’m going to be much help anyway.”

“No, I know.” Sympathy from him, now, that is a new direction. “But thanks for offering.”

“Sure. Hope you have some other ideas, too.”

I hesitate, not sure whether to tell him about Kinnel. I’m still not sure what’s going to happen with that, nor whether I did the right thing. But his offer of help has mellowed me somewhat. “I kind of might have told a freelance reporter that he kicked his son out.”

When I say it like that, it feels not so good. Father rubs his whiskers, and I know he’s not going to approve. But he only says, “Trying him in the court of public opinion?”

“He’s concerned about appearances. It might…um…”

“So you feel justified dragging his family business out in public.”

I point a finger at him, ears flat. “Prejudice survives in dark shadows. When people are made to be accountable, they feel pressure to do the right thing whether they want to or not. That’s completely different from outing someone.”

“Is that from a brochure? And isn’t your tiger already out? Is his father gay?”

I shake my head. “I was thinking of a friend of mine. It’s just different, that’s all.”

“So what if the papers print it and he digs his heels in?”

I rub my fingers over my cast. “Then how are we any worse off than we are now?”

“You don’t think it’ll make his father more angry at you?”

I lift my cast. “Hard to imagine that. Anyway, he yelled at him in a public place. It’s not going to come back to me.”

“Have you told your tiger about it?”

My tail curls around my hips. “No.”

“I see.”

I interrupt his judging. “I’m going to. Just waiting to do it in person.”

“You know how to handle him.” He holds up his paws. “I’m just thinking that if you’re trying to get him on your side, you might want to be more thoughtful about the things you do to his family.”

“He’s already on my side.” My tail curls more tightly against me.

He sighs. “Would you like to see a headline in the newspaper about your mother’s meetings with Mrs. Hedley?”

I bite off a facetious reply. “Sure. It wouldn’t do any good, though.”

“What about a headline about you?”

“I told you, outing someone is different.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t see that.”

“You’re not gay.”

He looks me in the eyes, and lifts a paw to rub the whiskers on his muzzle. “No, and I suppose that makes a difference. Your tiger is, and a celebrity. I really have no idea what that world is like. You could be right after all. Maybe it’s okay to do something that’s a little wrong in order to achieve a larger right. But have you thought about this? Have you thought that in throwing his son out for being gay, your tiger’s father is doing just that, in his eyes?”

“Maybe that’s where I got the idea,” I say, tightly.

“Fair enough.” He leans back. “Is he expected in town again any time soon?”

“They live up in Lake Handerson.”

“No, no. I mean your tiger. Devlin, right?”

“Dev. Yeah. Uh, no. I go down to see him when he has home

games. I'm going this weekend. But he doesn't come up here much."

"Too bad." He finishes off his beer and sets down the empty mug.

"I'll get this," I say as he fishes for his wallet, and he doesn't protest. "Another one?"

"No, I should be getting back. Work in the morning, and your mother's friend will be gone by now." He starts to get up.

I sit a moment longer, then think, hell with it, I don't like the wine anyway. I get up with him, toss some cash on the table, and walk him to the door. I want to say more, to respond to his reaching out, but I don't know how to do it. It's been so long since we talked without sniping at each other that I'm not sure how to handle it.

Outside, our ears flatten again, and tails fluff up. The wind's picked up, and the streets are emptier. "Want a ride back?" he says when we stop at his car.

"I'm good," I say. He unlocks the car and bends to open the door. The decision I've been struggling with for the past few minutes comes to a head. "Listen..."

He stops and lifts his ears a touch. I take a breath and then plunge on. "I was going to go down to Chevali for Thanksgiving. I'm not sure where we'll be going, but...maybe I could ask Dev to come up here." He doesn't say anything. "I mean, with the cold, it'll feel more traditional. I guess we'd just hang out at my place. If you'd want to come by."

The wind blows our fur in the same direction: his right, my left. He adjusts his glasses and then nods, the wind catching the white fog of his breath before it can properly form. But I can hear his words clearly. "All right. I'll give you a call."

I smile, raising a paw as I step back. He gets in the car and drives off.

Though the wind is brisk enough to make me want to shove my paws in my jacket pockets, I get out my phone as soon as my

father's car is on its way. Kinnel answers with a rasp in his throat that clears after a couple coughs. "Don't run the thing about Dev's father," I say.

He sounds amused. "Pangs of conscience?"

"You know, it just…I'll find you another story."

"That'd be good anyway."

"You didn't already run it, did you?"

He coughs again. "Would it make you feel better if I told you that one of the waiters at the restaurant was already going to the tabloids? That we split the money?"

"Is that true?"

"Will it matter?"

I wait at a corner for a light to change, a bundled-up raccoon a few feet away. I turn away from him. "It'll make me feel less guilty."

"Then it's not true."

The light changes, but I don't move. "What?"

"Listen, Mister Farrel," he says. "In my biz, you do some stuff people will give you shit for. You turn over rocks, shine daylight on secrets. You talk about shit people don't want talked about. And you're always gonna get people telling you to leave it be, let sleepin' dragons lie, whatever. The only way you deal with that is you take responsibility for everything you do. You decide it's the right thing, and then you stick by that decision. Be a *ma-e*."

"'Ama-heh'?"

"*Ma-e*. My grandfather was Navajo. It means…it's what us guys are supposed to be. Strong, upright, honest. Responsible."

"Huh."

"Yeah, it's a nice word to toss out. The point is, own up. You believe you're doing the right thing, show your balls."

I hurry across the street, turning a corner into the teeth of the wind. "Is that another Navajo phrase?"

"Nah, I picked that up from Chuck Danger at the Crystal City Herald. He's a skunk. He said that all the time. If you were slow

chipping in for dinner, he'd say, 'show your balls!' Said it to gals too."

I don't know what to say to that, besides, "Seriously?"

"Yeah, he said telling them to show their tits was illegal."

I snort. "Is that what you told your wife when she left you? That you were doing what you believe in?"

When he talks again, his voice is subdued. "That's cold, fox."

"You talk all this talk about being a ma-heh, showing your balls, and it's easy for you, this time. All you did was send someone some piece of someone else's life and collect a check."

"I don't see how it was harder for you. You just called me and now you're feeling guilty. And I'm tellin' you, it happens. Don't let it stop you from telling me more stuff, right?

"It's different when I'm just passing along Dev's quotes."

"Or yours. Whenever you want to tell that story..."

Maybe if Dev leaves me. It'd make a good cautionary tale. "Not yet."

He sounds amused. "Course not. Don't sweat the story, Red. Nobody reads the fuckin' tabloids anyway, nobody who matters. Bored females and college students, and nothin' they say gets taken seriously."

"That's sexist of you."

"All the same, my half was enough for rent."

"Half?"

He chuckles hoarsely. "Night, Mister Farrel."

I scurry the last two blocks back to my apartment, where I make myself a nice hot cup of tea and curl up in bed. I almost want to call Dev's father and just talk to him, even though my paw, aching from the cold, reminds me how useless that would be. Or his mother, but it's clear who's the *ma-e* in that family. If I'm using Kinnel's word right.

Come on now. I'm the fox who dressed up like a girl to trick a football player into fucking me. I spent my entire senior year hiding my relationship from my friends. How can I not be okay

with a little subterfuge, using the media to shame someone? I'd thought I was.

But what worries me more than ever is what Dev will say when I tell him.

AFTER TWO SOLID days running around the northeast, I hop on a plane for Chevali, and I'm not just looking forward to the warmer weather. Dev's playing a late game, and for once I can get to the stadium in time to watch it in person. They're playing their third consecutive home game, this one against the Highbourne Rocs. A lot of Highbourne fans in their navy blue and russet shirts have invaded the top deck, but fewer than used to show up at Chevali games last year. Nearby out-of-towners are finding it harder to get tickets with the Firebirds having such a good season.

My seat is down in the lower deck, near the top, so I'm not out of place in my Firebirds shirt. The family of possums next to me waves cheerfully in their red and gold; the foxes in front of me flash me vulpine smiles, tipping Firebird-logo hats; I look down over a sea of red and gold to the bright green field.

With binoculars, I check the stands for signs about Dev. There are a few supporters: Dev's Divas are back in the top section across from me, and in the lower deck near the end zone is a sign that says "#57: Pick It Off Then Pick Me Up." I grin and lower the binocs, scanning the Rocs sideline for Seito, the white wolf who beat Dev in his last game at Forester. I spot him, finally, wearing number 11 and a headset. He's supposed to be pretty smart, with a strong arm, just not as mobile or tall as most pro teams like. But he's in his second year backing up Highbourne's all-star quarterback, so he must be doing something right.

Dev keeps his phone off during games, but I talked to him before I got on the plane. It sounds like he's been having a crappy week of practice. The family thing's really gotten to him, the way

the stress of the whole thing with Brian did a month or so ago. Plus, the cougar he replaced, Corey Mitchell, returned to practice this week. Even if he weren't an ass, the possibility that Dev might lose the starting spot isn't helping.

But come game time, Dev handles everything pretty well. He runs his routes with precision, even if he still isn't anticipating what his teammates are going to do. I see Gerrard bark at him twice; he doesn't really respond.

Even so, none of the crucial plays of the game go through him. Chevali gets a touchdown on a nice run from Jaws, and adds a field goal just before the half. Highbourne keeps getting close but can't punch it in, so it's 10-6 at the half.

Highbourne is one team that is terrific at halftime adjustments. On their first series in the third quarter, they've got second and five from midfield. They bring in an otter at running back, which has Gerrard pointing and waving Dev and Carson into different positions. They come up to block the run.

Most teams have otters as kick returners if at all. They supposedly aren't tough enough to take the pounding a running back gets, but the Rocs are using theirs as a change-of-pace back, not an every-down runner. This guy is so good that he's got other teams looking closely at their rosters to see if any of their kick returners could play a little RB.

I've seen some good kick returners, but nothing like this otter. His offensive line opens a small hole for him for a second, but that's long enough. He jukes through, then darts forward under Carson's arms, quicksilver in russet-trimmed white. Once he gets past Carson, he turns on the jets and Vonni barely catches him at the two. They pound it in from there for a 13-10 lead. Dev was blocking on the other side of the field, and even Gerrard was too slow to get over to help. Nothing they could've done.

Highbourne's quarterback, a smart veteran wolf who started one of the two championships they won when Fisher was there, runs the rest of the game well. The teams trade touchdowns, and

then Aston launches six desperate passes in the last two minutes, completing four of them. The last one falls a foot ahead of Ty's outstretched arms as the clock ticks down to zeroes.

There's disappointed muttering around me, cheers from the upper deck. I stand with the possum family, whose younger pup is almost crying at the loss while his older brother looks on scornfully. The mother consoles him; the father says, "It's just one game."

"Highbourne's good this year," I say conversationally, allowing them to ignore me if they want.

The father, a few inches shorter than me, gives a quick nod. The crying pup is in his mother's arms now, so the father pats the older son. "We're still five and three," he says. "And we mostly kept their offense in check—except that one run. Good defense wins championships."

That perks me up as I make my way through the crowd. Dev's unit—his side of the team, that is—is getting good recognition. I can mention that to him tonight to ease the mood he's sure to be in.

Before I tell him about the tabloid story. My feet hesitate; the otter behind me bangs into me and goes around without a word. I keep walking, trying to turn over words in my head. How can I tell him? Show your balls, I hear Kinnel say. Maybe that might not be a bad idea to take literally. Be a *ma-e*, sure, but there are ways and ways to say things.

I make my way to his apartment, knowing he won't be there for a while. I don't know if the defensive players go out after a loss the way they do after a win, but I do know he's going to have practice tomorrow, so we'll only have tonight and tomorrow morning.

His building is quiet. I let myself in, wondering how long it'll be before some stalker makes it in through the building's shoddy security, and ride up.

Dev texts me as I'm pouring wine into a Firebirds mug. *HOME SOON* is all he says. I prepare myself and wait.

15

Indecent Exposure (Dev)

Lousy fucking week. Lousy mornings, lousy practices, lousy evenings. I was already in a bad mood Tuesday. Spent the morning stewing about my family and still couldn't get up the nerve to call my mother. Got to the stadium an hour early, spent it punching the punching bag in the weight room. I'm not worn out by any means, but I'm a little looser by the time I head back to the locker room to get dressed.

And fucking Corey's there. I'd thought he wouldn't be back for another week, at least. I don't even see him, at first. The distraction of the weight room is wearing off, dropping me back into the funk I was in all day Monday when I hear, "Yeah, I'll be starting again in a couple weeks."

I recognize the voice, but can't place it until I turn around and see the tall cougar, arm taped up, bragging to Carson. "I'm rehabbing way ahead of schedule," Corey says. "Doc says he's never seen anything like it." The leopard's pulling his uniform on, paying little attention to Corey.

I flick my ears around, away from him, and catch a snatch of conversation from a few lockers away: a sharp vulpine voice, purposefully loud. "That's the best thing I've seen in this locker room in weeks."

It's Colin, talking to Zillo. The coyote doesn't react to Colin, but he does catch my eye, his ears flat. I shrug, and he nods in return.

His paw makes a quick thumbs-up gesture, which I acknowledge with a smile.

Corey's standing near me when I turn around, dressed. He pretends it's just chance. "Oh, hey there, Miski," he says. "Not bad, huh? Thanks for filling in." I don't answer. He flexes his arm. "Coach says maybe I can get a couple series against New Kestle next week. I wanna see that stag again."

"I'm sure he'd love that too," I say. My paw curls into a fist, but I keep from punching the locker.

"No hard feelings," he says.

"Why should there be? If you earn the job back, you earned it. No hard feelings."

I toss the towel at him. He lets it fall past him to the floor. "How's those ribs feeling?"

I brush my brace and tape through my jersey. "This is just precautionary. You know how it is."

Pike steps in beside me. "Dev's fine," he growls.

Corey looks up at the big white bear. His assurance wavers a bit. "Geez," he says. "Suck a little cock and you can get anyone to defend you."

"Oh yeah?" Pike says imaginatively. The other guys around Corey look away. Some take a step back.

I grab the bear's arm. "Let him go." In my head, I hear my father say, *Devlin the faggot*.

"You won't have to settle for him for much longer," Corey says to Pike.

He doesn't respond, but I do. "Sorry, I gotta go. *Starters* are practicing." I follow Gerrard out, feeling Corey's glare on my back.

After five minutes of practice, I almost walk off the field. My ribs ache, even with the brace. I can't get my father's words out of my head. Fuck, is there ever going to be a time when my fucking personal life doesn't interfere with football? I anticipate Steez's growls, Gerrard's piercing looks, and I think, I'll be damned if I'll let my father interfere with my life that way. I hear Lee telling me

that I'm going to play football. I clench my fists. Damn right I am. Fuck the ribs.

The station practices, from one drill to another, help me focus. All you have to do is one thing: grab a ball, tackle a lineman, strip the ball from a runner. Mindless, repetitive tasks: exactly what I need. I punch, run, and tackle single-mindedly, leaving family behind. It takes me half an hour, with Steez's help, to figure out how to block without slamming into the injured rib. After a few hours at the stations, it's time for lunch.

Without the distraction of football, I brood over the two plain burgers on my plate and grunt replies to my teammates. They leave me alone. The afternoon doesn't require any talking: more drills. I'm exhausted at the end of it, but I run six laps around the field, even though my side's hurting again. I don't want to wait in the locker room, where I might have to talk to someone.

Despite my efforts, Gerrard's waiting for me when I walk in. I go right to my locker, panting. "Whatever's goin' on," he says, walking up beside me, "leave it off the field."

"Am I not?" I throw my helmet viciously into the back of the locker.

"You're doing fine," he says. "Some of the guys just noticed, that's all."

"If I'm doing fine, then what's the problem?" I snap.

He puts both paws up, pads out. "I'm just sayin'."

Charm, of course, comes over right then, carrying a towel, naked. "Looked like your panties were all in a bunch."

"Fuck off." It feels good to let out steam.

"Hey," Charm says to Gerrard, "you think if we can get the Highbourne guys to call him a pussy, he'll be this pissed at them?"

"You're doing fine," Gerrard says. "Just keep it that way. Don't let it get worse."

I laugh, and slam my fist into the locker. "Can't get no worse. So don't worry."

Gerrard gives me one last look and then grabs his things from

his locker. Charm, who has been waiting for me to shower, hangs around. “This ain’t about Corey, is it?”

“What?” I look around the locker room, but of course Corey isn’t here. I forgot about him hours ago.

“That’s what Coach Junior is worried about,” Charm says. “Thinks you think Corey’s just gonna take your spot.”

“So why doesn’t he just tell me he’s not?”

Charm shrugs. “Ain’t his decision, is it?”

“I guess not.” I sag against the locker.

“You gonna shower with your pants on?”

I glare at him. “You going to walk around all evening with your dick hanging out?”

He grabs it with his towel hand and punches my shoulder with the other. “’Kay then.” With that, he heads off to the shower. I stare after him, shaking my head, and then follow.

My lighter mood lasts only as long as it takes to get in my truck and get home. I grab dinner at the spaghetti place and call Lee. He’s trying real hard to get me to cheer up, talking about maybe me coming up there for Thanksgiving for a change of scenery. And hell, I think, nobody’s going to be practicing. Why not? But I can’t make myself be enthusiastic about agreeing. I can’t stop thinking about Dad, about Mom and Gregory, about not having dinner with them for the first Thanksgiving ever.

It reminds me of the feeling I had when I thought I might have to leave football, when I was thinking about coming out and the risk in that. Lee says it’ll only be for this year, me missing Thanksgiving. I can’t help feeling like shit at even missing one. He asks if I’ve called my mom yet, and I haven’t, because I don’t know what I’d say to her. I can barely think of what to say to Lee, except that football’s going fine and getting back to it will be the best thing for me.

Hearing him go from cheerful to discouraged, no matter how well he tries to hide it, is almost as bad as lying down on my broken ribs. It feels like the whole world is dimming around me.

The spaghetti tastes bland. The garlic bread is dry and stale, not at all like their usual. Everything on TV is uninspired. I play some rounds of UFL Football and lose every game. I know none of that is my fault, not like the hurt in Lee's voice, but I can't snap myself out of it. Not without football to distract me.

Corey joins the linebackers for practice on Wednesday. He's a step slow, and he doesn't know a lot of our plays. Still, he shows a lot of energy. Steez says he could see limited time in the backup spot as soon as next week. To keep myself focused, I watch him in drills, looking for the things he does well. I make it my personal mission to do everything just a little better than he does. This week, that's easy. Next week, I'm sure, it'll be a little harder.

Ogleby calls after practice. I tell him to leave me alone until next week. Miracle of miracles, he does. Charm, Gerrard, and even Pike try to draw me out, before, during, and after practice. I don't push them away; I just don't respond.

Thursday, Friday, Saturday, all the same. Lie in bed in the morning brooding until I can go to the stadium. Wear myself out in practice. Eat dinner alone. Talk to Lee for a short or long time, because the aches don't come when I'm talking to him. Feel better briefly. Fall into bed and sleep.

And then Sunday, game day, finally comes. We're all energized for the Rocs, or we should be. I feel it, but it's a weak shadow of what I felt last Sunday. I know Lee's in the stands watching today. I look for him, but he's in the shadow of the deck, at the top of the lower level. Hard to see back there.

I know he's there, and that's what matters. I don't let myself slip. I'm going to prove myself for him, prove my dad wrong, prove to Corey that he can't just walk in and take my spot. And I do pretty well. The Rocs are all business, quiet and efficient. I make some plays and I miss some plays. We hold them in check pretty well, but their defense is just a little better, or our offense just a little worse. We're up 10-6 at the half, but it doesn't feel like we're winning. Jaws got one touchdown run, and they clamped down

after that. He's not finding any holes to run through. Aston keeps rushing his throws because they're bringing pressure every down.

Coach's halftime speech is encouraging, and the mood of the team gets pretty positive, except for me. Gateway is the only really tough team we've beaten, and a win here would do a lot to build belief in ourselves. And all we gotta do is keep doing what we're doing.

Then the otter rips off that fucking run past Carson, and that deflates us. We stay close to them all second half, but the whole team can kinda feel we're not going to make it. It's a fog that settles on you, no matter how much you fight. Your legs feel heavier. Your reflexes feel slower. It's not just me; everyone's a half-step off.

The bright side is I'm working better with Gerrard. Least, I think I am, and he doesn't yell at me once the whole game. And the focus of game time, of running the plays and anticipating the other side, dulls the edge of my family troubles. But although we do the best we can, Gerrard and I aren't on the field when Aston's last pass sails long. Time runs out. The scoreboard reads Firebirds 17, Rocs 20.

We march out to congratulate the other team. It's been weeks since we had to do that. Any good feeling I had from how well Gerrard, Carson and I are meshing is lost in the oppressive gloom of defeat. I'm exchanging meaningless words with a cougar on the defense who has some good moves when I feel a paw on my shoulder.

I turn. It takes me a minute to remember the white wolf standing there, the setting sun pink on his white fur. He looks familiar, but the navy and russet is throwing me off. Then he holds up two fingers and grins. "Two and oh against you now," he says.

"Seito." He nods, his grin widening. "Yeah, you wore that headset like a pro. Why don't they have you starting yet?"

"Ah," he waves in the direction of the all-star wolf at the center of a mob of microphones and cameras, "they got this old guy they

like. How you doing?"

"Keeping the D-II spirit alive."

"Amen." He squints up at me. "Were you gay, like, all through college?"

I glance around. Everyone else is busy with their own thing. "Not all through. Just the last year or so."

He bobs his head. "Awesome. Still with the same guy? Don't hear much about him."

"Yeah."

"Cool." He leans in and says, in a quick, low voice, "Text me in the off-season if you ever wanna double-date."

I blink. His brown eyes sparkle with sunlight as he steps back and winks. "You...?"

He puts a finger to the front of his muzzle. "Shh. D-II spirit."

"All right." I grab his paw and clasp it tightly. "Good game."

I'm still trying to process Seito outing himself to me, if that is what he did, when we gather in the locker room. Coach reminds us that he doesn't like losing. "Got a road trip coming up," he says. "New Kestle, Hellentown, and Port City." We murmur. Port City's leading their division. They and Hellentown went to the playoffs last year. "This road trip is where our character will be tested. I know this team has character, that every one of you has the heart of a winner. None of you has anything to be ashamed of after this game, but now you know you need to be sharper, harder, faster. I know we can do it! Are we? Are we?"

"Yeah!" We yell. For a moment, the energy of the team that we've had for the last month comes back.

"All right. We're gonna be away from home for three weeks. We want to try staying on the east coast the whole time. Let's use this road trip to come together as a team. Practice tomorrow. Friday we fly to New Kestle to start a new win streak."

"We need the extra practice," Gerrard says to me as we're dressing, post-shower. I'm holding my cell phone, deciding whether to turn it on. Lee knows when I'll be home, and I don't

want to talk to anyone else. I drop it in my pocket, still off.

"Speak for yourself, Coach," Charm says. "Did you see me kick right over their rabbit, number 92? Thought he could block me."

"We," Gerrard says, indicating him and me, "need the extra practice."

"Oh. Yeah, you're right."

"Fuck you, kicker," I say. Charm gives me a friendly push. I return the favor, sending him two steps back.

He folds his arms and sings, "Kicker, kicker, I'm a kicker" while trying to do a little Siberian kicking dance that ends up overturning one of the large equipment benches. Our equipment manager grumbles and waddles over to straighten it up. Charm pretends to dust himself off, comes back over, and pats my shoulder.

"Awright, Gramps, I'm heading out. You guys doing dinner?"

I look at Gerrard. He nods. "Short one, though. Everyone's gonna want to get home early."

Not only that, the mood at the dinner is significantly muted. It's been a month since we lost, and that was in a rainstorm on the road. We, the defense, make some half-hearted comments about how the offense needs to step it up, how holding Highbourne to twenty is pretty good—their second-lowest total of the year, someone says—but I have the nagging feeling that I could've done just a little better. Looking around at the lowered ears and downcast eyes of most of my teammates, I guess they're thinking the same.

Carson, in particular, downs beers faster than I've ever seen him drink. He's uncharacteristically talkative. "Should've had that guy. I'm fast enough to take him. Thought you were closer to the sidelines." This last to Pace, who made the tackle that temporarily saved the touchdown.

"Hey, I was covering their cheetah," he said.

"It was a run," Carson says, though not looking at Pace.

"They've run the flea-flicker."

“Once all year.”

“Hey,” Gerrard says. “We did good. We got some stuff we need to fix in practice, but that guy’s gonna get his yards. We kept him mostly contained.” He lifts his glass, then thinks about it and stands, getting everyone’s attention. “Listen,” he says, “we’re gonna lose some games. No shame in losing to Highbourne. Like Coach said, we’re heading on the road for a month. If we keep together, keep trusting each other, keep playing at the level we’re playing, we’re gonna come out of this with three more wins and we’ll come home…for Monday Night…eight and three.” He pauses to let that sink in. “Eight. And Three.

“No Firebirds team in the last fifteen years has been better than four and four at the halfway mark. We’re five and three now. We have more wins than ten of the last fifteen Firebirds teams got all season. And we’re not done yet. But we need to be a team. We need to stick together.” He glares at Carson and Pace. “You got that? You hear me?”

We all raise our glasses. He sweeps the room with his gaze. “One, two, three,” and we all join in the toast: “Defense!”

The mood picks up somewhat after that. Vonni grins a grin that reminds me of Lee, and says, “You’re gonna make a good coach,” across the table to Gerrard.

“In a couple years.” The coyote acknowledges the compliment with a flick of his large ears.

“I mean this week.” Vonni waves a black-furred paw dismissively. “Highbourne? Whatever. When we see ’em in the playoffs, we’ll be ready.”

Gerrard shows a toothy smile. “That’s the spirit.”

People start to disperse not long after that, muttering about practice and sleep. I take out my phone to text Lee that I’m on my way. It buzzes as I’m putting it back. I wonder what Lee’s saying, but it’s not Lee, it’s a voicemail. Weird. Ogleby knows not to call me, and anyway, it’s only one voicemail, so it can’t be him.

My new phone, it turns out, tells me what number it is that left

the voicemail. The old one did, too; I just never bothered to figure that one out, and this one doesn't need me to figure it out. It just shows the entry right there on the screen: "Home."

My heart jumps. I screw around with the phone's interface for a minute until I get the message to come up.

Mom's voice sounds in my ear. "Hi, Devlin, it's your mother. I just came back from the supermarket and I saw the Weekly News. I don't understand why...I'm very upset. I'll call you again."

That's it. I stare at the phone. What the hell?

I call back, but there's no answer. The voicemail greeting has been changed to a terse, "This is the residence of Mikhail and Duscha. Please leave a message."

"Mom," I say, "It's Devlin. Listen, I don't know what you're talking about. Call back? I'll have the phone with me. Please give me a call."

The Weekly News? I can't remember what that even is. Then, passing a supermarket on the way home, it hits me. I make a sharp turn into the parking lot, ignoring the honking, and park in a handicapped spot. I'm only there for two minutes, the time it takes to run in and grab a paper from the rack and throw a five down on the nearest register.

Then I'm outside, trying to decipher the photo-crowded cover and blocky white print. In the corner: "GAY FOOTBALL STAR'S ANGUISH." I flip to page three.

There, amazingly, is an account of the fight I had with Dad in the restaurant. Well, sort of an account. It's insane. They say he called me a "little girl." They claim that he threw a bottle at me on his way out and that I sat at the table and cried for an hour after he left. They even get Dad's name wrong, calling him "Robert." It would be laughable if it weren't so insulting.

The pages are crumpling in my paws. I crush them and throw them onto the passenger seat. Jerking the truck into gear, I back out quickly and drive the last few blocks home. Who the hell...some waiter at the restaurant, maybe. Because I didn't call

them, and Dad didn't. Lee? No, he wouldn't do that.

Fucking hell, I didn't need this on top of everything else this week. What's gonna happen when the guys on the team see this? Practice is going to be even more miserable. Corey'll love it. I can just hear him saying, "Hey, Miski, don't start crying," when Steez yells at me. Fuck.

I pound the steering wheel and hear a crack. Nothing appears to be broken, though, when I glare at the plastic. Maybe just stress noise. My ribs creak in sympathy.

On the way up, in the elevator, I can't keep from pacing back and forth, swinging my duffel bag against the walls, the newspaper crumpled in my paw. I hit the wall once or twice. The elevator feels confining, stifling. I jab at the button for six again with a finger, a knuckle, a fist. When the elevator finally lurches to a halt, I shoulder through the slowly opening doors and fairly leap across the landing. I jab the key at my lock three times before it goes in.

I don't see Lee until I lock the door behind me and turn around. I drop the duffel and throw the newspaper at him. His ears fold down as he opens it. "Page three," I snarl.

I want something stronger than beer, but my liquor cabinet is bare. I grab a can from the fridge and crack it open as Lee says, "You cried for an hour?"

"No." I almost crush the nearly-full can in my paw. My claws scrape the metal. "And my father's name—"

"Isn't Robert. I see. Also they seem to have been able to overhear choice parts of the conversation."

"God fucking dammit."

He drops the paper. "You think if your parents see it, maybe—"

"Mom already did. She called."

"Oh." His voice is very small. "Did she...did she say whether you should come home?"

"I haven't talked to her yet." I look at his lowered ears. "But it doesn't sound like something she was getting ready to say."

We stand, not looking at each other, for several silent

heartbeats. I don't want to ask him if he had anything to do with it. I don't want him to think I don't trust him. I wish I didn't keep thinking it. His tail is curled down between his legs, his arms are folded in front, and he appears to be staring at the border between the living room and the kitchen.

"Dev," he says, and I know what it is before he says it.

"Don't tell me," I say, roughly.

"I need to." He takes a breath. I could stop him here. "I talked to Kinnel. That reporter. But I didn't tell him any details."

I stare at the paper so I don't have to watch him. "He got details."

"I said you went out to a Sonoran restaurant."

"That's a detail." My claws are out. I pull them back in and stab a finger in his direction. "You just can't leave anything alone. You told me it would blow over, you said it wouldn't last. Did you even believe that?"

Rather than becoming more miserable, he fires back. "You weren't cheering up! You were depressed all week, and you still are."

"It's been *one week*!"

"Yes, and you haven't talked about it, made any effort to talk to your family, done anything at all."

"I called my mother."

"That helped."

I growl, "And I suppose you just called this morning and got the story in the paper hours later."

He looks down. "I talked to him, what was it, Monday."

"Monday. One *day* later." I throw my new phone at him, missing on purpose. He jumps as the phone smacks into the wall and drops to the floor. Little pieces skitter away from the large crack in the screen.

"Don't throw things." His tail bristles, then smooths out.

We both stare at each other. "I'll say I'm sorry if you do."

"I'm sorry," he says, immediately. "I'm really sorry. I tried to

take it back."

"Not hard enough."

"Not soon enough."

My fists are clenched again. "Lion Christ, Lee, why did you do it? Why spread our family business all out in public?"

"I thought..." He clenches his own paws into fists. "I thought that maybe public exposure would make him take you back."

"Take me back? You *met* my father, didn't you?"

"I thought it'd shame him. Prejudice survives in...in...I didn't think about the effect on you." He wrenches the words out, with visible effort. "I thought you'd be fine."

His ears are flat. He looks thoroughly miserable and yet hopeful, beneath it all. I'm about to make him more miserable. "Fine? Do you even know me?"

"Dev—"

"It sounds like you've been talking to Brian again."

His expression closes. "No," he says quietly. "No, I haven't. And he hasn't been talking to me."

I feel a pang at that, but I'm still struggling with the idea that Lee, the one I went to when my father kicked me out, betrayed me. He didn't go talk to Brian, but he talked to this reporter. "So this guy, Kinnel. Did you jerk him off, too?"

His ears flatten. His expression closes even further. "At least hear me out before jumping to conclusions."

"So tell me what the attraction is. Go on. I'm all ears."

"Are you going to throw something else at me?" I quash the guilt and just glare at him. He exhales. "Listen, I thought he could help—"

"I don't want to hear what you were thinking!"

He folds his arms. "Then what do you want?"

I want him to go back in time and make it not happen. I pound a fist against the wall. I don't like how good it feels. "You're supposed to be the smart one!" I yell.

He doesn't jump at the crack, but his ears flick. He steps back

into the bedroom and picks up his unopened suitcase. For a moment, he hesitates, looking at me.

I stalk across to stand in the bedroom doorway, blocking his way. “You think running away is going to help?”

He doesn’t drop the bag. “I’m not running away. Just giving you time to cool off.”

“Right,” I say. “Time. It’ll get better in a few months, right? Or years? Or should I call your reporter friend and tell him to print this?” His ears fold down. “Would that shame you into doing the right thing?”

He winces, but stands his ground. His voice is steady, but I can tell the words come with an effort. “I swear I was just trying to help you.”

“I can take care of myself,” I snap.

His ears flick. “You’re not doing a very good job.”

I smack the door frame. “Better than you are.”

There’s a kind of energy between us when we fight. As close as we are now, I feel it, but it’s tainted. I want him to comfort me, but he’s the one who hurt me. I can’t resolve it. I see the conflict in his eyes, as he looks at my fist. “I should go.”

He’s worried I might hit him. I’m worried about that, too. “Why do you want to run out on me? Going to see him?”

He shakes his head, sharply. “You’re not seriously jealous?”

“No.” I unclench my fists. “I don’t know what I am.”

“I told you the first chance I got. I didn’t want to do it over the phone. I know I screwed up.”

“Yeah, you did.” I stare him down until his ears flatten. “You screwed up the way you always do. You took things too far and you think you know what’s right for everyone.”

He sags. I don’t want to feel sorry for him. I want to feel angry at him. And I do, but it’s all mixed up and confused and I hate that. I wish I could just feel hard, clean anger. Or that he would say something that would let me forgive him.

His voice is still firm, but low. “I guess you’re right, stud. I do

all that. I do the only things I know how."

"Why do you have to do anything at all?" I cry.

"I can't not do something. I can't just sit and wait. I'm gonna screw up sometimes. I'm sorry. I'll help fix it—"

"You can't fix it." I grope for words. "How can I ever trust you?"

He winces. Shit. I can see the answer, plain as day. His eyes are so full of hurt I can't look at them. So I close my eyes and lean against the doorframe.

I'm encased in stillness. Then I feel him move past me without touching. My arms burn with the need to reach out and grab his shoulder, to keep him here, to yell at him or to throw him onto the bed and fuck him again, or just to shake him and make him tell me why he did this. Why, why, why?

"Why?" I croak.

I hear him turn. He's halfway to the door. For a minute, I don't think he's going to answer. Then he does, quietly, with just a little quaver in his voice.

"Because he hurt you. He hurt you, and I'm not big enough to kick the shit out of him."

The door opens. My eyes stay closed. I strain to listen for anything in the silence. The door closes, softly.

Oh, shit. I didn't think...I didn't imagine. The raw emotion in his voice brings it home. He really did do it all for me. It was clumsy, and shitty, but he did it for me. And I told him I didn't trust him. And he walked out.

He'll come back, though. He has to. He always wants to talk things out. I bet he won't even get in the elevator. Unless he really thinks I don't trust him any more. Or that I might hit him. Or that I'd rather go back to my family.

I want to yell through the door at him. Pressure welds my throat shut. I hear the elevator arrive, with a weary clatter. The doors open. Eternity passes before they rattle closed. The elevator starts its creaking descent. Nobody turns the door handle to come

back in. Nobody knocks, tentatively. I take a step toward the door and stop. The silence is crushing me.

16

Descending (Lee)

Part of me would like to slam the door behind me, but I don't deserve to let that part out. I do let it stab the elevator button repeatedly, as the gears of the massive mechanism grind and turn. Dev's question echoes in my head: Why? Why?

How could I know they would make up details about him crying? In my head, it was a dry, factual article about his father kicking him out. His teammates would be sympathetic; hell, the world would be sympathetic. I grasp at that image as though I can push it into reality. If I can will it hard enough...

But I can't. Behind the apartment door, the paper still lies on the floor. Dev is still slumped against the wall.

My paw closes around my phone. I'm itching to call Kinnel, but again, I don't deserve that yet. I'd just vent my anger on him, and while he may deserve that, I'm going to wait until I'm a little more calm. Get my own house in order first.

That's one of Mother's sayings. God, there's another whole hairball I don't want to poke at. I actually felt sorry for my father after our talk. Are they going to split up?

Are Dev and I going to split up? I still think I can justify what I did. It was a mistake, but well-intentioned. In the end, though, if it's a bad enough mistake, does it matter what you meant to do? Isn't trust the foundation of any relationship?

The elevator doors open. I perk my ears back, for any sound

from Dev's apartment, any last-minute rush to the door to tell me come back, come back, all is forgiven. The elevator waits with me. I sigh and step inside. Without any anger, I push the 'G' button. Ground floor. Going down.

The elevator shudders to life. After a moment, it starts creaking downwards. Goddamn tabloids. Goddamn Kinnel. If it had been a fair story, that would have helped, wouldn't it? Would Dev be as angry if they hadn't made up those details? The crying, the "little girl" comment? Where did those come from, anyway? Gay stereotyping. Just like the questions at his press conference about looking at other guys, just like that fucking boar and the stallion before him thinking Dev's a sissy. I drop my bag and try hitting the side of the elevator with my unbroken paw, but the impact is weak and unsatisfying. I fold my arms and glare at the display as if the changing numbers are sponsored by the Weekly News.

We can sue the paper, I suppose, or get Kinnel to write a retraction piece, but that's not a real solution, and it's not even the real problem. People are going to write what they write, think what they think. Gay stereotypes will persist, but they are changing (in part thanks to Dev). I just want them to change *now*.

The number five blinks on. The elevator dings and keeps going.

It's just frustrating to be trapped by those stereotypes when they don't even remotely fit. We're not promiscuous, me and Dev. We don't go see musical theater. He hits people all day long, and he's really good at it. I take his cock, sometimes without any more lube than a pawful of saliva. I'd like to see some of those tough straight guys do that.

What other people think doesn't matter, though. What matters is what's between us and whether it's completely broken or just scarred. Scars are fine. We've already got a lot of those.

I start cataloguing the scars and then stop. The time I lied about Brian, the time I freaked out at him about my parents, the time I pushed his father until my thumb broke. Every time, I'm the one screwing up and he's the one taking me back. You'd think he'd be

used to it by now.

Yeah, my inner voice tells me, *but wouldn't it be easier just to stop screwing up?*

Maybe. God knows I'm trying. I rub at the part of my paw pad that isn't inside the cast. Didn't even wait to get the cast off before doing something else stupid. I could promise to do better. Again. I don't really think I can screw this up any further.

Too little, too late?

Hope not. But what else can I do? Dev's not in any mood to hear me beg for forgiveness. I can't call the tabloid and have them un-print it. I can stop talking to Kinnel, but then he'll just expose my identity, eventually, no matter what he says. Besides, I still think having a representative of the media in our corner will be a good thing, in the long run. I just have to tell him next time that he can sell it to anyone but the tabloids. Or he has to write the story himself.

I could've explained to Dev that my motivations had very little to do with the result in the paper, for all that that matters. Not that he'd listen to me. In his place, I wouldn't listen to me either, not right now. But maybe it'll help later. If there is a later.

There has to be a later, doesn't there? I messed this up, I can make it right. I can't see how, right now, but there has to be a way.

Then again, that's how I got into this mess: by not leaving things alone. Always pushing, always changing, always going a little too far until things are fucked up beyond repair.

Ding. Four.

This elevator is fucking slow. Dev really needs to move to a new place. Even if I don't go with him. That thought scares me. It feels like a hole in me, because I'd just thought of it as something I'd do, something I'd be part of. What the hell would I do if I didn't have him to talk to every night, to look forward to coming down to visit?

I'd have my job, which I've been neglecting this weekend. Haven't written up a single game yet. Going around to all those

college games, I'd be reminded of him every time I saw a tiger in uniform, every time I saw a defensive back get a good jump on the ball, every time I saw someone with potential who just needed a little push to realize it. How long could I keep that up?

It's football. I still love football. Even if it's all tied up with Dev, now, I still love it. I could throw myself into scouting the college kids.

Wow, that sounds bad. But I think about King, the pain he showed in the e-mail, the pain he was taking out on the other team on the field. Gay college athletes—I could help them, couldn't I?

Whatever happens with Dev, I'll get by. I've rebuilt my life before. I threw out the whole idea of graduating, I threw out the idea of being an activist, I threw out the idea of having a public relationship.

Of course, when I did those, I was doing it for Dev. Maybe not exactly the graduating thing, but I adjusted my life for him. He made adjustments for me, too. We were willing to change for each other, no matter how rocky the process. We had great fights, and better make-up sex, and there's nobody in my life that I trust more. There's nobody in my life I even trust half as much.

Ding. Three. A ferret shambles into the elevator, squints at me, and settles herself in the far corner.

Could I say the same about him? He jumped right away to thinking I was doing something with Kinnel, which I guess isn't so unreasonable after the thing with Brian, but still, I promised to do better about *that*, and I have. Would I want to stay in a relationship without trust?

Yeah. Trust. That's what's missing. If Dev would only trust me, I could explain all this. But if he's not going to make the effort, if he's not going to even give me a chance...sure, he's just had a bad day. Losing the game, still reeling from his father's asshole move, I'm sure he wasn't in the best mood to hear about his boyfriend completely selling out his family.

Fuck.

I've always thought we could work things out. Maybe this time, we won't.

I could find some gay guy in Hilltown. The message boards are full of them. I could start over, build a foundation of trust. We could settle down, have lots of comfortable sex and conversations about musicals and sports. I could meet his family, already comfortable with his lifestyle. He'd be a fox, maybe. He could meet my father.

But I can't picture being with a fox. Or an otter, or a wolf, or a coyote. Or any tiger other than the one I'm slowly dropping away from. I've never opened myself up to anyone else the way I have to him. He takes my sarcasm and turns it around, challenges me to be a better fox. A *ma-e*, Kinnel would say. Nobody else ever did that. My parents tried to make me into what they want me to be. Brian tried to make me his partner in activist subversion. Dev makes me what I want to be, only better.

Ding. Two.

And who am I, when it comes down to it? I exist apart from Dev, even though we affect each other strongly. This tabloid mess is my fault, and pushing off on Dev some vague worries about trust issues is just dodging the point. The point is, I'm the kind of person who sometimes does things he wishes he could take back. Dev's learned that over the years.

I know who he is, too. The flares of temper, the time it takes him to get through things (I could probably stand to take more time to think things through, if it comes down to that), all that is part of who he is. What I love. If he'd accepted my explanation right away, let me talk him down, he wouldn't be Dev, and something would be subtly wrong. He needs the time to come to grips with things, and I need this time to figure out myself.

Which leads me to Kinnel, who is also trying to figure me out. Maybe I'll call him next week, if Dev and I do split up. He still couldn't use my name, but that anonymous story would be okay. Maybe he could turn it into a whole series on how not to handle a

relationship. I mean, yeah, I am who I am, but I don't have to be quite so much who I am. Not when it fucks up other people.

The elevator settles to the ground floor. The ferret shuffles forward.

I rest my broken paw against the elevator wall, staying in the elevator just a moment longer. The doors will take forever to close anyway. My hard cast comes off next week, so I'll treat that as a new beginning. Think about everything, don't push yourself, don't push other people, don't be so reckless. I know that at least I did the right thing by telling Dev right away. If I hadn't told him now, I would've told him later, and this moment would have been even worse.

I can think that, but I have trouble picturing how it could have been. I'm standing here not knowing if I'm going to see him again outside a TV screen. I guess he could've hit me. I almost wish he had.

But no, I feel—I hope—we can fix this. I'm just being melodramatic. Aren't I?

A thought occurs to me, and I lean my head back against the back of the elevator. I've just given him the excuse to break up with me and go back to his family. They'll be sure to let him know how right they were about me. 'You see,' his father will say, 'this fox is no good.' He might not believe it at first, but he won't have an answer for them. He's probably on the phone with his mother right now. I hope he is. That's what he should be doing.

Sure it is. What he should be doing is growling at me, telling me I fucked up and that the next time I do it he's not going to fuck me for a week. I want him here so badly, even furious, even untrusting, as long as he's *here*.

My head is pounding. I should just hit the button for six and go back upstairs. I should tell him we can work this out, that I'm not going to run away, that I'm not going to give up, fuck if it's not my choice, it takes two to break up, right? I know I can say the right thing if I just have the chance. I can find the words.

But that dream is no more real than the article I'd wished Kinnel had written, like the contrite Mikhail in my fantasies accepting me without question. I used up all my words. I don't have any more.

The pounding gets worse. I lift my unbroken paw to my temple, but the noise is outside, not in my head.

I open my eyes. The doors are wide open, the ferret's gone. The pounding is getting louder. I take a step forward. It started above me and is descending, like—

A door I can't see bursts open. Dev runs past the elevator doors, into the lobby. I hear the front doors rattle. Fleetingly, I consider pressing one of the upper floors, any one, just to not be around here if he comes back in, but then the doors start closing on their own.

One massive paw curls around the edge of the door, stopping its movement. Panting, he springs into the elevator, staring at me. His finger stabs at the button for six. I have a moment to open my mouth and then he's on me, his bulk crushing me into the corner. I think I make some kind of choking or yelping noise before his arms wrap around me and we bang into the wall of the elevator.

At the same time, we yelp in pain. My thumb throbs where my cast slammed into the wall. He flinches around his ribs. His muzzle is pressed between my ears, and it's wet. He smells of sweat and passion, but not sex, not anger. It's an odd combination, but it fills me with so much relief I go a bit weak in the knees. The elevator doors close, slowly.

"God damn you," he mutters into my ears. "God *damn* you. You're such a fucking idiot."

The elevator starts to rumble upward. "I know," I say. My voice cracks. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't even think they'd make stuff up...."

"Not *that*," he says. His arms tighten. "Walking out on me."

"Oh." I press against him, not knowing what to say. "Well, you let me."

“Yeah,” he grumbles. “But I’m a jock. You’re s’posed to be the smart one.”

I press my nose into his chest and inhale his scent. Everything’s fucked up and I can’t remember being happier. “You crying?”

He snorts into my head fur. “No.”

“Jeez, it hasn’t even been a whole hour,” I say.

He grabs my cheekruffs and tilts my muzzle up. I can see the matted fur around his eyes, his tender, exasperated expression. I can smell his tears now, too. “Doc,” he says, “for once in your fucking life, shut the fuck up.” And then he enforces that by pressing my muzzle to his.

I don’t need words, not any more. I close my eyes, and they don’t stay dry either.

17

Interception (Dev)

Make-up sex is fucking awesome. There's not a lot of foreplay, unless you count the fight. We're both too desperate to get to that point where we're together again. He lies on his back, muzzle pressed to my chest, legs hooked around my back. I thrust into him while he arches back, my nose full of his scent, my arms so tight around him I am never, never going to let him go again. He holds me just as tight.

I know he never intended to hurt me. Moving together the way we do, him allowing me inside, it's all pretty fantastic. We twist and strain, pant and moan, yelp and growl, and climax like firecrackers. There's heat and stars and everything is perfectly perfect in that moment. It's like those early days when I had no idea what I was doing with him, just that it was the best I'd ever felt when fucking.

Now I know that that's the "physical manifestation of our closeness." I know that because Lee says that sometimes when we talk about sex. Doesn't matter what he calls it. It's good, and lying together afterwards is heaven. He nestles back into my arms, light and slender, and so, so warm. I hold him there, and he doesn't squirm away. We don't even get up to shower.

Later, I remember that I'm mad at him, too. By now, I should be used to being mad and in love at the same time, but I'm just as confused as ever. The only thing I've gained from going through it

so often is the confidence that it doesn't mean things are broken, or over. And with the haze of musk thick in the air and on our fur, it's hard for me to be really mad.

But Lee, of course, might've thought that this was it. I mean, I did freak out a little more than usual. "It's been such a bad week," I say, lying next to him, his head in the crook of my shoulder, my arm curled around him. I did say a lot of bad stuff, and it makes me feel bad, even if he deserved it. I want to apologize to him, but I can't bring myself to say the actual words.

"I know." He's got a hold of my tail, rubbing gently. I curl it around his fingers. "I didn't want to wait."

"No." I sigh. "Fuck."

"The one thing," he says, gripping my tail more tightly, "is do not under any circumstances tell Ogleby about this."

"Oh, God."

"It's a tabloid. Nobody would've paid attention to Brian if Ogleby hadn't made a big press release deal about it."

I close my eyes, digging my fingers into his fur. "So what am I supposed to do about Mom?"

His chest rises and fall against my arm. "Talk to her. Tell her it wasn't your fault."

"I don't think she thinks it is."

His long muzzle rests against my shoulder, his breath ruffling my fur. "Maybe you can go back. Without me. Just to show the neighbors everything's normal."

"And then your cunning plan would have worked."

He exhales, long. "Don't they always?"

I squeeze him. "Can you maybe warn me next time you start one? No more surprises?"

His lean body shifts against mine. "If there's time." I growl, and extend my claws against his side. He squirms away from them. "Yes, yes, yes. I promise."

"So what's your cunning plan with this reporter, this Kinnel guy?"

He stays tense against the claws. “I don’t really have one.”

I push a little more. He makes a little squeaking noise and presses against me. “He wants inside scoops every now and then. I promise I’ll ask you first. But if we need a media guy, someone on our side to help us with the press…he might’ve given us good advice on how to counter what Brian was saying, or how to deal with the fallout from that.”

I ease up. “But he’s the one who caused this problem.”

“He didn’t write the article. I’m almost sure of it.”

“Maybe I should meet him.”

“I don’t…” He stops mid-sentence and rests his paw on my stomach. It’s warm—his paw—and a little sticky. “Maybe that’s not a bad idea. I have to leave tomorrow morning, but next time I’m down here.”

“We won’t be back for a month.”

He flicks his ears, brushing my shoulder. “I could see if he wants to have an early breakfast tomorrow.”

I retract my claws as I think about this. Am I really in the mood to meet a reporter first thing Monday morning, before practice? Before saying good-bye to Lee? “No, that’s fine. As long as things aren’t going to happen in the next couple weeks.”

He relaxes. The tension in his body eases. His tail swings around to brush my legs. “Am I coming to see you in New Kestle?”

I sigh. “I don’t know. Coach is all about using this road trip to come together as a team, blah blah. Let me see how it goes. Maybe Hellentown.”

He nods and rests against me. “I’ll definitely be in Port City. You need to meet my Aunt Carolyn.”

“She sounds cool.” I go back to rubbing his side.

He drags claws across my stomach. “You should call your mom back tonight before it gets too late.”

“Right now?”

His black fingers hesitate, near the whiteness of my sheath. “Probably not too much longer.”

“You going to shower?”

He shakes his head and then says, “If you are. I was thinking I’d clean up in the morning, but I can wash up while you’re talking.” His long muzzle shifts, and he kisses me on the cheek.

I lie in bed even after he gets into the shower. What am I going to say to Mom? I can’t think of anything more than a variation on “I’m sorry, how can I make it better?” So that’s what I decide to go with.

I put on a robe. My phone is still lying on the floor. When I pick it up, it doesn’t come on. I shake it, press the button again. A few more fragments fall to the floor.

Awesome. I growl at the noise of the shower and reach for the land line before I remember that I never had it hooked up. “Hey,” I yell at the shower, “I need to use your phone.”

“Okay,” he calls. I dig into his pants pocket and find his phone.

She answers hesitantly, not recognizing the number. “Hi, Mom, it’s me, I’m on Lee’s phone,” I say. The phone’s a little awkward to use; he has the extension on the mike for his longer muzzle and I can’t figure out how to take that off. So I talk a little louder than usual.

“Oh, Devlin, what is this about?”

She sounds plaintive. The anger in my voice isn’t directed at her. “Didn’t Dad fill you in?”

“I mean, why is it in the news?”

“Did you tell Dad about the newspaper?”

When she hesitates, I press, and finally she says, “I told him.”

I press my eyes shut again. They feel sticky from crying still, even though that was a good half hour, forty-five minutes ago. I extend my claws just enough to feel the pinpricks against my face. “Great.”

“He is upset.”

“Mom, they got everything wrong. It wasn’t me, it was...” Even though I planned the lie, I still hesitate. “Someone must have seen us at the restaurant.”

She pauses. Her voice lowers. “He said just, he said you told him you cared more for your fox than for our family.” I don’t say anything. “He said this newspaper proves it.”

“I told him to apologize for breaking Lee’s paw. I told him I wasn’t going to stop seeing Lee. I didn’t say—God dammit, I didn’t say that! And I didn’t call the goddamn paper!”

“Devlin,” she says, softly.

“I didn’t, Mom! I love you guys! But I love Lee, too, and I’m not going to—I can’t give him up.”

“You know how your father is. Can you just pretend…” I hear her claws on the plastic of the phone. “For the holidays. After your football is over, then we can talk. Maybe it will be okay, next year.”

“You want me to lie to Dad.”

“There are times—”

“No, Mom!” I stalk across the apartment. “If we can’t figure this out like grownups, telling the truth and not hiding sh—things from each other, then what’s the point? I sat in that restaurant waiting for Dad to come back and he never did, he just walked out. Fine, now I’m coming after him. I’m asking him to compromise.”

“I know you were crying—”

“I was not crying! I told you, they made shit up. I just got really drunk and then—” Probably shouldn’t finish that sentence. “Went home.”

The fur dryer starts up in the other room. I press the phone to my ear as Mom talks. “It’s okay to cry, Devlin. What your father did was very harsh. But he believed it was the right thing to do. He is trying to teach you a lesson.”

“I am not going to have this same argument all over again. Can’t you do anything? You liked Lee, right?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.”

“Yes it does. Lion Christ, Mom, you’re a part of the family, too. Stand up for it.”

“I am doing what I can, but your father…I can’t just tell him

he's wrong."

Now I'm remembering Dad's comment about hitting girlfriends. Fuck fuck fuck. I did not want to think about that now, even if he was only joking about it. "Then I'll tell him. Put him on the phone."

"If you just tell him what he wants to hear, you can—"

"That'd be great, wouldn't it? I'd be home and Dad could think he's gotten what he wants. Then next year we tell him I was lying all along. Is that how it goes?"

She sighs. "You are making this difficult."

The fur dryer stops. "Mom, I love you. I want more than anything to be home for Thanksgiving." I take a breath. "But I can't lie to Dad. I don't—Lee doesn't have to come home with me. But I'm not breaking up with him, and I'm not telling Dad I did. What if he hated Gregory's wife? Would you tell Gregory that he had to divorce her?"

"Of course not. Don't be silly."

"What if their son is gay? Is Dad going to ban him from family gatherings?"

"Now you are being ridiculous."

"Really? Put Dad on, let me ask him."

"I don't understand what the fuss is about."

"You don't." I take a breath. "You don't see why you wouldn't ask Gregory to divorce Marta just to make Dad happy."

"They're *married*." She sounds bewildered.

"I've been dating Lee for almost three years. He's as important to me as Marta is to Gregory."

That doesn't sound like it clarifies anything for her. "But they're married. And you're just... Devlin, if you want to date...him...then I understand, even if your father doesn't, but it's not serious."

"Not serious. You know, when Dad walked out on me, when he fu—fucking abandoned me," I growl the f-word defiantly, to her scolding tch, "I went to Lee. And he listened to me and he made me feel better and he told me to call you."

“I know he’s a nice person, but—”

“He’s more than a nice person. He’s part of my life. And you and Dad need to accept that, or, or…”

Lee’s standing in the doorway to the bedroom, holding a towel in front of himself. He has both ears up and his eyes are wide. He shakes his head minutely from side to side.

Mom isn’t talking. I meet Lee’s eyes. I think about Mom and Dad, how I called them when I got a starting spot at Forester, how I hugged them after high school graduation, how proud Dad was when we won our eighth game in high school my senior year. I think about the birthday parties, the afternoons at the auto shop, road trips and Christmasses. Thanksgiving. Easter. Church picnics and bake sales, dinners at Guiseppe’s.

I think about Dad’s expression when Lee came back into the house with a broken paw. I think about Mom’s weakness. I think about the back of Dad’s head disappearing out the door of the Sonoran restaurant. “Well, Dad said it,” I say. “I won’t come home.”

Lee sags against the doorframe and holds the towel to his face. Mom doesn’t say anything. I can’t stand the silence, so I break it. “So are you going to put Dad on the phone?”

“I don’t think that would help.” Her voice is hollow. She sounds like she’s about to burst into tears. I fight the urge to take it all back.

“I love you, Mom,” I say. “Good-bye.”

I wait for her to answer. The line goes dead. Lee lifts his muzzle and looks at me.

I take the phone from my ear and toss it to him before I realize what I’m doing. He grabs it out of the air and sets it down on the chair by the doorway. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

“I’m sorry I threw the phone at you,” I say. “I broke it.”

“Give it another week,” he says. “Let your Dad calm down a bit.”

“Focus on football, right? That’ll solve all my problems.”

He walks over and puts a paw on my arm. I can smell the fur shampoo, stronger even than his musk on my matted, sticky stomach. I try to push him away. “You’re clean.”

“Yeah, well. I’ll wash again.” He presses closer, his other paw undoing my robe. He tries to hug me.

“You don’t have to.” I take a step back.

His eyes gleam reflected light at me. “I helped make the mess. Come on, I’ll help clean it up.”

I stand still while he gently drops my robe to the floor, pressing his clean fur close to me and wrapping his arms around me. I feel close to tears again, but at his tenderness, after I threw a phone at him, after I yelled at him and let him walk out, after I fucked him while drunk to make myself feel better. He’s telling me that none of that matters, that he’s mine. And I’m his, just as much.

When I pull back from the hug and kiss him, already feeling better, he smiles and drags me to the shower. We order dinner in when we’re clean, eat in our robe (me) and boxers (him), and curl up together. I lie awake for a long time, holding Lee against me, thinking about my life. It’s only taken a month for everything to be turned upside down. I still get a crawling feeling under my fur if I think too hard that I will never be able to go home again. That word, never, is big and scary and sits on my chest more heavily than Lee ever could.

My arm tightens around him. A small part of me wants to push him away, to be alone and deal with my problems all by myself. That’s nothing to do with him, though. I’ve always been that way, as long as I can remember. And yet I keep going back to him. I introduced him to my team. I introduced him to my family. I gave him plenty of reasons to leave, tonight, but he stayed. Well, he hesitated long enough that I could catch him.

At the end of the day—figuratively and literally—I want to be with him. I’ve long since given up trying to understand why that is; it just *is*. Some days it makes me angry, some days it makes me ache. It’s given me moments of pure hell, like earlier tonight. But

being with him always feels better than being without him. Even when he does stupid stuff.

I kiss his ears gently. They flick as he settles against me. I breathe in his scent and smile. This moment right here, this is heaven.

Part V

18

Audible (Lee)

Monday morning is silent, a little awkward, but I keep my ears back and look sorry until he growls and says he forgives me. And says, actually, that he forgave me last night, and then I say, I know, you forgave me really hard, and he shoots me one of those looks. If we weren't in the car on the way to the airport, I think he'd end up being late for practice.

I haven't been home on a Monday in a while, so for the heck of it, I go to the office directly from the airport. The Dragons lost again. This gets me and Alex a little nervous, so we walk around the stadium looking at old trophies. If the team has a crappy enough season, the GM might get fired. And if he gets fired, any of us in the scouting department could lose our jobs too.

"Morty and Paul will be okay," Alex says.

"You'll be fine, too." I touch one of the championship pictures. I'd wanted to be part of that, but to be honest, I was happy just working in football. And today, I'm still thinking about Dev. I wonder if it would impress his father if I could show up wearing a championship ring. Probably not. He'd just complain about all the faggots in football these days.

"I dunno, might get bumped back down to assistant." He leans against the wall, long ears pressed against it. "How was your weekend? You weren't at the game."

"Crazy." I scan the faces of the players in the photo. "Family

drama. You went, I guess. Sorry." The Dragons lost. Again.

He nods. "We're really not that bad. Just a couple pieces away, you know."

Listening to his rundown of the game, I get absorbed in my job. We walk back to our office, where I stop in with Morty and catch up, and he hints that I might want to be around the office more. I tell him I will be.

He stops me from taking off after that. "Firebirds defense is still playing well."

"I thought so. Couldn't get the offense going."

"That's going to stop them in the playoffs. They could use a playmaker."

"Couldn't we all?"

He snorts. "*We* could use about four. But they'll get one. Corcoran runs a good team over there."

I looked up the big article Kinnel wrote about the Firebirds, a few years back, where he praised the front office. But I'd heard something else about the Firebirds that he didn't mention. "Didn't he have money problems for a while?"

Morty laughs. "Got rid of his money problems when he fired his son-in-law."

"I thought he was a big family guy."

"That's why the kid got the job in the first place. Campbell met him once at one of the summer meetings. Said the kid was the dumbest fox he'd ever met. 'Ninety-eight watts short of a hundred-watt bulb.' But Jennie Corcoran hung on his arm the whole weekend."

"And Corcoran just fired him?" I bet he didn't kick his daughter out of his house for marrying an idiot, even if he fired the idiot.

Morty waves a paw. "Set him up with something else. Managing a furniture store or warehouse or somethin'. Wish our problems were that easy to solve. You see anyone good in your games this weekend?"

I give him the rundown of what I saw and then we talk about

the current state of his rocky marriage until he has to run off to another meeting. I go back to my desk in the office I share with Alex. Entering the data doesn't take my mind off Dev and his family.

My phone, lying on the desk, suggests something I could do. I've been thinking about it all day. I have his parents' number in the phone now, in my history. I could talk to his mom—she's home during the day when his dad's at work. She'd at least hear me out, could maybe help me think of somewhere to go from here, some way to make this all work. I'm just worried I'd alienate her, too, and then where would I be?

"Something ain't working." Paul's leaning against the door frame of our office, rubbing his horns against the wood. "Our fucking defense couldn't stop a blind mouse."

"The Devils played a mouse back in the fifties," Alex says mildly.

"Hergest Thockton," I chime in. "Scored two touchdowns on kick returns."

Paul scowls. "Whatever. Did you see that third quarter? They adjusted and we did nothing different. I'm telling you, Ferguson just stands there on the sidelines like a corpse."

I agree with him, but I don't want to agree out loud. Neither, apparently, does Alex. "He's getting a lot out of those players."

Neither one of us has been with the Dragons as long as Paul; neither one of us has as much invested in the current team. He scowls again, leans against the other side of the doorframe so he can rub the other half of his antlers there. I fold my ears down against the scraping sound. Paul goes on to talk about the players we have who did a good job, and there we agree with him. His presence becomes moderately bearable until he starts talking about commercials.

"Oh, and did you see that faggot pushing Ultimate Fit?"

"Christ, Paul," Alex says.

"What? He told the world he's a faggot. I can call him that."

“Hey, Paul,” I say.

He doesn’t hear me, or pretends. “I mean, whatever, but the way he was shaking his ass for the camera.” He squinches his eyes and sticks his tongue out.

“Hey, Paul?” Louder. He opens his eyes and focuses on me, still rubbing his antler against the doorframe. “What bugs you about him?” I say.

Lines crease between his eyes. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “You call people ‘faggots’ when you don’t like ’em. So here’s this guy who’s gay, and you call him a ‘faggot’ too. So I’m just wondering.”

“Is this some kind of HR bullshit?” He frowns and folds his arms.

“No, I’m serious. I just, personally, I don’t get it. I mean, he likes guys, you like girls, who gives a fuck, right?”

Paul looks at Alex with a half-grin, like, seriously? Alex just shrugs. Paul says to me, “You really don’t see anything wrong with having a cock in your mouth? Getting it up the ass?”

“I just don’t see why it matters what the guy does in his bedroom.”

He waves a hand. “He made it everyone’s business.”

I lean back in my chair. “He had to. Look at the guys who keep calling conferences to tell the world they’re *not* gay. It obviously matters. I’m just trying to figure out why.”

Alex is keeping an ear pointed at me, but watching Paul, whose eyes flick back and forth. He stands upright, his antlers now grazing the top of the door. “You really don’t...” He shakes his head so his antlers rap the wood. “He doesn’t get it,” he says to Alex, and laughs.

I’ve no idea what Alex is going to say. Usually he just keeps his head down. But addressing him directly spurs him to talk. “I’m not sure I do, either, to be honest.”

Paul’s nostrils flare. He looks back to me, and then throws up his hands. “Maybe I am crazy,” he says. “We got dicks. That means

we fuck other things. We don't let them fuck us. It's..." He gropes for words. We both wait patiently. "Just ain't the way things are s'posed to be."

"Makes a guy weak," I say. "Letting another guy do that." I see Vince King, a savage on the field.

"Do we have to talk about this?" he says. His antlers rap the door frame again. "Fuck. Let's talk about the fucking Dragons. There's a bunch of faggots."

Alex laughs, but not for the reason Paul thinks. Paul chuckles along with him. I don't. I feel every second tick by. "Sorry," I say, "I still don't understand why your choice of sexual partner makes you weak."

Paul rolls his eyes. "Look, I got work to do," he says, and starts to move away from the door.

Vince King, the huge bear, slumped on the bench. Dev, anguished, talking to his mother. "Paul," I say.

He stops. I straighten my shoulders, sit up in my chair. He's looking right at me, and I say the words loudly, making sure he hears. "I'm gay."

His wide eyes get wider. He laughs, again. "No, you're not. Fucker." He starts to walk on, and then pauses. Alex has his head in his paws and is staring straight down at his desk, ears flopping down so the tips are almost touching the papers he's looking at. Paul glances at him and then looks at me, nostrils flaring again.

I nod. Now my heart is pounding. "Yeah. Seriously."

Paul stares, and then looks at Alex. "Did you know this?" Alex doesn't answer, or even look up.

"Alex didn't know," I say. "Just thought I'd tell you."

"Fuck." He stares at me. "Why?"

I shrug. "We've been working together a while. Figured you might be curious why I never talked about a girlfriend."

He stares at me, and then relaxes. "Just figured you're a loner. None of my business."

I feel curiously nervous, still, even though the words are out

already. Paul's not going to punch me, he's not going to make a scene. "Figured you might want to know who's listening next time you call someone a 'faggot.'"

That alarms him. He points at me, nostrils flared. "Listen," he says, "you can't get me on no HR bullshit. I didn't know until just now. You said so yourself."

I rein in my activist side, which wants to light into him with all sorts of shit about discrimination and ignorance and people like Vince King being his fault. He's having a hard enough time taking this in. "I'm not planning to go to HR," I say. "Like I said. Just thought you should know."

He nods, relaxing, though his eyes are still wide. His words come quickly, jerkily. "All right. Well. I got work to do. See you guys."

One of his prongs catches the door frame as he walks out, making him jerk and stumble. I glance at Alex, but he keeps his head down. Neither of us says anything. Alex looks up a moment later, then turns to me. "Did you plan that for the moment when he'd be most uncomfortable?"

"Didn't really plan it," I say. "Just seized the moment."

He grins. "You got a boyfriend?"

Shit, if I say Dev's my boyfriend, I'll get myself and Morty in trouble. In the noble moment of coming out, I kind of forgot that. It's okay, though. If I don't mention the relationship, we're cool. I nod, trying to be offhanded. "Saw him this weekend."

"Cool," he says. And bends back to his work.

And that's it. For Alex, at least. As we're leaving the office, Morty waves me down. Alex stops along with me. All the things Morty said about being in trouble come rushing back to me. Shit. Did I just get him fired?

Morty smells like cigarette smoke and I don't think he's washed his shirt in a few days. The Dragons' poor performance is weighing on him, or else he's on the outs with the wife again. "Hey," he says, one eye on Alex. "I heard about your...talk with Paul."

“Alex was there,” I say.

“He said something about HR?”

I shake my head. “He didn’t coerce me or harass me or make me feel uncomfortable. It just felt like the right time.”

Morty grumbles. “Wish you’d warned me.”

“If I’d called to warn you while he was standing there, it would’ve spoiled the surprise. Did he come complain about working with the faggot?”

Morty picks his teeth with a claw, then retracts it. “No. Not much, anyway. He’s just paranoid he said something you’re gonna sue him for.”

“I told him I wouldn’t.”

He glances at Alex, who nods. Morty sighs. “Your timing kinda sucks. Three of our draft picks from last year ain’t done squat but cash our checks. Meanwhile, this fuckin’ Coberton looks like he’s gonna be Rookie of the Year, and we specifically told ’em to pass on him.”

“Bennett’s gonna be better in two years,” I say, with more confidence than I actually feel. Behind me, Alex agrees.

“Good. Hope whoever’s runnin’ scouting then appreciates it.” Morty raises a paw. “See you guys later. Lee, I told HR you told me first, then the other scouts. Hope you don’t mind.”

“I figured Paul would’ve told everyone.”

“He kinda did.” Morty coughs and chuckles. “Asked the bears if they knew someone who was gay. They said no, and he said, don’t be so sure. Then he gave them three guesses to figure out which of their co-workers he was talking about.”

“See, that’s something he could get in trouble with HR for. Revealing personal information about a co-worker.” I hold up a paw. “Like I said. I expected that telling Paul was the same as telling the whole group.”

“I calmed him down,” Morty says. “I think he gets that it’s no big deal. Just take it easy for a couple days. Though if it gets people talkin’ about anything other than the fuckin’ rookies this

year…" He scratches his cheek. "I got a meeting with Campbell tomorrow. Think you can show up and come out to him? Might distract him from our piss-poor performance on the field."

"It wasn't that bad," I say.

"Did you watch the third quarter?" Morty rolls his eyes. "Don't know why we're sending cornerbacks onto the field at all."

"I meant my coming-out." I grin, my tail swishing. Morty rolls his eyes and heads back to his office.

Alex and I walk out into the parking lot. "I think I might actually survive this," I say.

"I wonder if one of the bears guessed me first," Alex says. He folds his ears down against the wind.

"You?"

"Yeah, you know. Kickers." He shrugs and shoulder-bumps me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I would've." My tail wags. "You first, of anyone. I just didn't know how it'd go. You know, you can't exactly start a conversation with 'hey, guess what?'."

"Could've said, 'I saw my boyfriend this weekend.'"

I shoulder-bump him back. "It's just hard to break the inertia."

"You and your fancy college-words." He snorts, reaching for his keys. "So what did?"

I sigh. "It was a rough weekend. Made me think about stuff."

Alex pauses, key in the lock of his car. He looks back at me. "You wanna get a drink?"

I'm itching to call Dev. But Alex looks like he really means it. "Sure," I say.

We only hang out for an hour. I don't tell him who my boyfriend is, but I talk to him about the issues with the parents. I talk to him about the long-distance relationship. He sympathizes, telling me about the time he dated a mouse and his parents freaked out about it. I tell him a bit about my parents, too, and we talk about gay marriage. Then he has to go home to his wife, and I have to go home to my takeout dinner and my phone call with my

tiger.

Dev laughs when I tell him about my day. “Jealous of all my drama?” He tells me about his day of practice, a rough Monday because it comes on the heels of a game day. Everyone’s still beat up from the game. His ribs are feeling better, enough to hold off Corey for another week, it sounds like. He got a new phone—“I saw that coyote again, and he really recognized me this time”—but hasn’t called his mom yet. It doesn’t sound like he will.

When we hang up, I look at my phone again. I call up his parents’ number and stare at it. Then I put the phone down.

The team meeting the next day is interesting. Paul doesn’t say anything, not directly. Twice he starts to say, “That f—” and changes it to “fucker.” Which, if not more appropriate, is at least less directed. I feel I’ve done some good. I talk about my players, the few really good prospects I see. As the meeting winds down, we start talking about the Dragons. In deference to the formal setting, we dance uncomfortably around the crappiness of the current team, and talk about the bright spots: which players need time to develop, which ones are showing promise on the second and third teams.

The meeting ends without any mention of my little news, or any acknowledgment from anyone, unless you count Paul’s eyes getting a little wide whenever he has to address me directly. That’s only the first half of the meeting, though. When I make another crack about his antlers, his annoyance overwhelms his discomfort. I grin at him, and he scowls.

One of the bears, though, steps up to me as we’re leaving the room. “Hey, you know,” he says as we walk down the hall. Alex, in front of us, swivels his ears. “I know a gay guy. Runs the grocery store down the street. You know him? Lex? He’s a ringtail.”

“Gee, I dunno.” I pretend to think. “I’ll look him up in the directory.”

I actually take out my phone and play with it for a bit before he catches on. To his credit, he laughs and flicks his ears back. “Pretty

dumb," he says. "Sorry."

"Hey," I say, "look, I know it's weird. I'm cool with questions, whatever. Just to make it less freaky for you."

He scratches his ear. "Uh..."

"I'm not going to answer anything about 'what we do in bed,' though."

"I wasn't gonna ask," he says, so defensively that I feel sure he was. What the hell is it with jocks and wanting to know who's on top? Paul, with his "guys fuck things," and Mikhail's "doesn't matter what a boy sticks his dick in."

And that gives me an idea. I miss what the bear says next, and have to ask him to repeat it. "Look, if you were wondering, it's cool. I mean, I don't get it, personally, but long as you don't, like, make a pass at me or anything."

"No worries," I say, perhaps a little too quickly, because Alex stifles a chuckle.

"What is it," I ask him later, in our office, "that makes jocks think that gay guys all want to make a pass at them?"

Alex snorts. "We think about our bodies all the time. We can't imagine that everybody else doesn't, too."

I laugh. "I spend a lot of time thinking about my body."

"It's different when you're an athlete. No offense, but..."

"No, I know." To be fair, I spend a lot of time thinking about Dev's body, too. "What did you think about Paul's whole 'guys do this' thing?"

He grins, showing his prominent incisors. "All I can tell you is I don't want nothin' jammed up *my* ass. Maybe that's what he's thinkin'. Guys like Paul are old school, y'know. Beef, beer, and boobs."

I grin back, with fangs. "Yeah. We don't fit into their paradigm."

Alex raises an eyebrow. "It probably doesn't help when you say shit like 'paradigm.'"

"Oh, I know he makes fun of that. He did it in an e-mail once."

But the thing I keep coming back to is that Paul relaxed when I started teasing him again. When I fell back into the pattern we'd had before. When I acted like nothing was different. The question is, how do I do that with Dev's father, when we didn't *have* a relationship before this? How can Dev do that with his father, when his father's cut off all contact?

I turn over my idea. I think it will probably work. But I need to go about it carefully, because I'll only get one chance at it.

Like Dev, fortunately, I can lose myself in football, watching film, going back to previous weeks when a player appears to come out of nowhere to see if it really is out of nowhere, researching injuries and other reasons previously high prospects might have tanked. Uniforms and numbers blur by the end of the day, until Alex punches me on the shoulder and reminds me to go home.

It's Tuesday night before I realize that I haven't heard anything on the sports networks about the tabloid story. Could it be that I was right, that nobody paid attention to it? The thought makes me want to fly to wherever Ogleby is and strangle him. If not for him, we might not have had to go through any of this. If he hadn't made a big deal out of Brian's blog outing Dev, the last month might have been much calmer. Dev might be going home for Thanksgiving.

Then again, I think, lying back in bed, is it such a bad thing? Dev's out and he hasn't been cut from the team, or speared by an opposing player. Gerrard and his wife were pretty cool, and so was Vonni; Fisher is too, and Gena is warming up to me, I think because I called and asked about Fisher in the hospital.

One of the things my father always told me foxes did best was roll with the changes. Make our own luck. At least, he used to tell me that when I was a cub. I didn't hear it when I was trying to do just that coming out of college, abandoning my degree for my job scouting football. And I haven't heard it lately. Lately he's surrendered to circumstance, forgetting that we Farrels, at least, are quick thinkers and speakers, relying on our brains and tongues

to get us out of trouble. Though in my case, at least, my tongue's gotten me into trouble more recently than it's gotten me out.

So I call Kinnel, to vent some of that frustration. "What kind of fucking hack job did you let them do on that story?" I start with. I know he's not responsible, but I want him on the defensive.

"Whoa," he says. "I ain't even seen it." Which is a lie, I'm sure. "What'd they write?"

So I tell him. Predictably, he denies any involvement in it, and apologizes conditionally. "That's what tabloids do," he says. "That's why they get the big circulation, that's why they pay."

"Yeah, well, you almost got me dumped over this. You owe me one."

"*I* owe *you* one? Hold on a minute. Who's keeping whose secret, *ma'am?*"

"You almost ruined your own secret. Call People next time. Or Stars." I remember vaguely the titles from Dev's time with Caroll, whom, it occurs to me, might not be a bad resource.

"I don't know anyone there. The News, they got an office in Crystal City. One of the old Herald guys ended up there."

"You've got to have other friends."

"Not as many as you'd think. And I ain't countin' Corky, case you were wonderin'."

I shift the phone. "Thought you guys were tight. All that stuff you wrote about his front office."

"I'm proud of those pieces."

"They were pretty good." I relax into my chair. Just having yelled at him feels good. "Even if the subject matter was all kind of bland. Efficient front office, family business, good-hearted owner."

"I write what I see."

"It was interesting that you didn't write about why the owner's son-in-law was fired, I thought."

He pauses. "Found your name in a front office too. Up in Hilltown. That why you don't want to be out?"

I let him change the subject. If he didn't write about it in the

article, why would he tell me about it? “Pretty big conflict of interest. But I did come out at work.”

I can hear his ears perk up. “That mean I can write the story about ya?”

“Not yet. I didn’t tell them who I’m dating. How’s the rent?”

He grumbles. “Paid. F’now. Next month I need to turn the heat on.”

“I got an inch of snow on the windowsill. You’re breakin’ my heart.”

“You grew up there, though. I’m a desert cub. Hits fifty and I’m throwin’ on the blankets.”

I laugh. “Hey. Did I make a good vixen?”

When he finally responds, it’s cautious. “I ain’t sure how to answer that. You mean, didja fool me? Yeah, at first.”

“You were hitting on me pretty hard.”

“You think that was hard?”

I stare up at the ceiling, tail swishing lazily over the bed. “Not really. Did you guess before doing your research?”

“What is this? You lookin’ for tips to improve your costume?”

“No. Just…just wondering.” I bend one knee, cross the other leg over it.

“Yeah, sure, you had me fooled.” He growls it. “About bein’ dumped, too.”

“Sorry about that,” I say. “I am.”

“But after I knew, when I saw ya at that lunch place, I could see it. You know what I mean?” He doesn’t wait when I stay silent. “Anyway, I like ya better as a guy.”

“Heh. Why?”

“I dunno. Don’t have to worry if you’re thinkin’ I’m hittin’ on ya all the time. Don’t have to waste time thinkin’ about if you might let me take ya home. We can just talk.”

“Even though I didn’t get dumped.”

“You said you almost did. Maybe that’s good enough.”

I shift the phone and flick the ear it’s hooked into. “You still

miss her?"

"Kinda. I miss what she used ta be. I miss what we had back when we started. It ain't so much that I want her back now."

"She's moved on."

"She don't see me the same. Y'know, you get to know someone and some things turn out more important than you mighta thought."

I think about Mikhail, and his snap judgment of me. "Sometimes when you get to know someone, your opinion of them improves."

He chuckles. "Someone make a bad first impression on ya?"

"That too."

"Who was it, you don't mind me asking?"

I guess there's no reason not to tell him. "Dev's parents."

"Ah. So that part wasn't a lie."

"I didn't lie about everything."

He chuckles. "We all lie about something. I expect it."

"So what did you lie about?"

"Oh, there's all kinds of lies," he drawls.

"Evasion."

"Omission."

"Statistics."

He laughs. "Little front office humor?"

"We take it where we can get it, these days."

"The Dragons aren't a total loss."

"We'll get a good draft pick."

We talk football for a little. It helps. "Hey," he says as I'm saying good-bye, "don't let the parents get in the way of you two."

"Bit late for that." I try not to let my good mood dissipate. "That what happened with you and Cimarine?"

He doesn't hesitate. "Partly. But her mom couldn't make her do anything she hadn't already decided to do."

I sigh. "I guess that's good. Talk to you later…" I pause. "Hal."

"Goodnight, Mister Farrel."

"Oh, for God's sake, call me Lee."

He's still laughing when he hangs up.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT, when I talk to Dev, he says he's going to call his mother and then call me back. He's a lot more relaxed about the whole tabloid thing now that it has—fingers crossed—sunk without a trace. I think he won't completely relax until next Sunday, when the new issue knocks the old one off the shelves. I know I won't.

I wait for him to call back, but he never does. Let him be, I decide.

He doesn't call all the next day. That night, I'm just turning in when my phone rings. Prepared for Dev, I glance at it and freeze. The number is unfamiliar for a split-second, and then I recognize his parents' home number.

Shit, really? Why are his parents calling me instead of him?

Maybe it's his mom. That makes the most sense, that she wants to try to reconcile us somehow. My intuition tells me otherwise. I take a breath and prepare the things I have to say, then get ready to sound surprised.

"Hello?"

"This is Mikhail Miski." There's no mistaking the gruff voice with the Siberian accent.

"Hi, Mr. Miski. What can I do for you tonight?"

"You can leave my son alone."

I keep my sigh as inaudible as I can. "I really don't think that's going to happen."

"I am telling you that you need to make it happen."

My prepared words scrabble around, bereft of context. I keep them on hold. "Or what? Or you'll kick him out of your family again?"

"Yes, I saw that you felt it appropriate to tell the world about

our private business."

Guilt flushes my ears. "I..." He waits. I can hear the smugness in his breathing. I don't want to admit it, but my resolution about being a better person, a stand-up fox, a *ma-e*, keeps me from lying outright. "The tabloids make up a lot of stuff. So do waiters in a restaurant when you make a scene in public."

"I did not make a scene."

"Funny. I think getting up and storming out just as your food is being served qualifies as a scene. Maybe you do that all the time at the auto shop." Fuck. Keep yourself under control, fox.

"You had best be careful what you talk about in public. There are parts of your life that you would not want made public."

I stare at my cast. I bite back about five comments. "I'm certain that's true."

"Then we understand each other."

What? "I understand that you're threatening me. I'm not sure with what. Or what I'm supposed to do."

"Let me be perfectly clear. I have seen that you do not want your association with my son to be made public."

"It's nice to know you still think of him as your son." I can't help that one. This guy just rubs me the wrong way.

"If you want that privacy to continue," he says, "you will end that association."

"So if I don't want you to tell the world that he's my boyfriend, I should break up with him."

He purrs. "I see you foxes do eventually catch on."

"To hell with that," I say. "Dev wouldn't agree to break up when you threatened *him*, and he actually loves you. What makes you think I'll do it?"

"I have already given him his choice," he says. "Now I am giving you yours."

"At least I know you can't dislocate my thumb over the phone."

He's quiet. "I did not intend to do that."

It strikes me that this may be the closest thing I get to an

apology. Do I say ‘thank you’? I settle for avoiding the rest of the subject altogether. “Listen, Mr. Miski, and I hope you can understand me. I love your son. He loves me. When the rest of the world turns its back on us,” oh, God, I’m reciting bad movie dialogue, “I mean, when we don’t have anyone else to count on, nobody to listen, we always have each other. I—we think that’s more important than who’s sticking what in whom. If you can’t appreciate or understand that, then...then I don’t think we have anything more to talk about.”

That wasn’t the speech I had prepared, but it went pretty well anyway. He stays quiet, building my hope that I reached him. But when he does speak, he just says, “Perhaps you do not understand, after all.”

“Hey,” I say, “I understand that you’re ashamed of our relationship. But we’re not. Okay?”

“Good night,” he says. The phone goes dead.

Damn, I’m glad I came out at work this week, otherwise I might be really scared. All the same, I can’t imagine he’ll go through with it. He isn’t exactly anxious for the world to know that his big, strong football player son is fucking a weak faggot fox. I think it was an empty threat. And even if he does break the story, who’ll care? I’ll start to get bugged by tabloids; I can deal with that. Might even be the best thing for us. Maybe after the season I’ll let Kinnel write up his story.

I call Dev. He doesn’t answer, so I leave him a terse message to call me, and a text as well. I curl up in bed, stare at the building across the way, and think of him.

19

Road Woes (Dev)

Monday and Tuesday are killers. After a month of free Mondays, it's hard to go back to day-after practices. It's worse this far into the season: everybody's sore, everybody's nursing minor injuries. Gerrard twisted an ankle; Carson strained a hamstring; my ribs still ache and my foot is acting up again. But we push through it, keeping in mind the memory of the loss. By the end of the day, I actually feel better. Exhausted, but better.

The linebackers all go out for dinner after, including Corey. He praises the squad, talking about how impressive we looked—everyone but me. He doesn't make any comments about me being gay, at least.

After dinner, I corner Gerrard. "Tomorrow night, extra practice?"

He flicks his ears. "You up for it?"

"Hell, yes."

He glances at Corey, who's just chatting with Carson at the door. "Sure."

"You used me to motivate him, once," I say. "I don't mind if you use him to motivate me."

He grins a long coyote grin. "Whatever it takes." He clasps my shoulder. "Welcome back."

Seems weird for him to say that, but I have to admit I was pretty damn focused in practice. I had to be. If I let my focus slip, I

started thinking about Lee and my family. It's not as bad as it was last week, when thinking about them twisted up my gut. In fact, I've started remembering things I did to Lee. Telling the team who's on top—I know that pisses him off. Hiding the fake engagement from him. I never did anything like call the papers to tell them about his family blackmailing him—or extorting, whatever he calls it—to stay in school. But I ain't pure as snow either.

I talk to him late that night, and again Tuesday. He keeps telling me to call Mom. I know I should, but I'm scared to. I can't help it. When I think of Mom, I think of her arms around me when I broke my arm, when I was five. I think about her hug when I went off to college, telling me she believed in me. I think about her liking Lee, that nice talk the three of us had the first night home. I'm afraid if I call her, I won't be able to remember that any more.

Tuesday and Wednesday night, Gerrard and Carson and I stay late and we grab a few guys off the practice squad again. They're tired from the day's practice just like we are, but they're game. "Watch me," Gerrard tells me and Carson. We don't have any plays to run—we do enough of that during the day—so it's a matter of anticipating what the practice squad guys are going to do on offense and knowing what Gerrard is going to do. I've already been on the field with him for a month, but without the plays it's all about instinct.

I've had flashes of being able to anticipate what Gerrard is going to do, but tonight I feel a lot more confident about it. There are times when I think about it consciously, others when I just move and it turns out to be the right decision. "Good," he yells at me after one of those times. The practice squad guys aren't fast enough to keep up with us, but they show us a lot of different looks on offense and sometimes make bad decisions, which is great. It stops us trying to figure out what they're going to do. We have to react to what they actually do.

"We're getting it," Gerrard says. "We're getting it." He yells

across to the practice guys. “Pick it up! Come on, show us something!” They growl and yell back, and get set again. And we stop them. They only get past us maybe once in the last ten series we run.

Afterwards, we hit the showers again. None of ’em gives a shit whether I’m in there or not. The only time my sexual preference even comes up is Wednesday night, when one of the practice squad linemen, a bear, is talking to the cheetah wideout who was passing the ball (you can’t ever get one of the actual QBs to do extra practice). The bear’s got his massive paws out in front of his chest as they’re coming out of the shower. Happens to be right by my locker when he’s saying, “…but Charisse, I dumped her when I met Keri, I mean, two fucking sizes bigger.”

He catches my eye. I grin at him, and he nudges the cheetah. “Dude,” he says to me, “whatever starts your engine, but I need a good pair of tits.”

“You checked out Hector lately?” I jerk a thumb toward the other lineman, a boar still in the showers. They guffaw, and the bear gives me a thumbs-up.

“Hey,” I say, “Solid blocking.”

“Thanks.” Serious now, he nods at me. “You guys are the best in the league.”

I shrug. “I know a couple coyotes in Crystal City’d argue that.”

“No, really.” The cheetah moves on, leaving the bear. “I learn somethin’ when I practice against ya. Stuff we don’t get in the usual practice, y’know?”

“Thanks.” I pull my pants up. “That’s all Gerrard, though.”

“Anytime you guys wanna practice, lemme know. I’ll stay ’til midnight, whatever.” He extends a paw. “Jake.”

I smile and shake. “Dev. Good to know ya.”

“Yeah.” He starts to walk away, and then says, “hey, and, anyone gives you shit about fucking dudes, you let me know.” I stop, shirt in one paw, and can’t help grinning. “Serious,” he says, and he is. “Fuck that shit. We a team.”

“Thanks, Jake.” I extend a paw again, and he grasps it eagerly.

The memory of that exchange keeps me in good humor most of the way home. I call Lee from the car and tell him I’m going to call Mom that night. If most of the football team can come around in under a month, why can’t Mom and Dad? I feel optimistic, even though I know it’s stupid.

I pass up dinner with the guys so I can get home early. I don’t say it’s to call my Mom. Doubt sets in as I’m eating takeout burgers on my couch, as the moment of the call gets closer. I think about Jake and his support. I think about the coaches and the rest of the team. I think about Gerrard inviting Lee to his house. When I take a deep breath, my ribs barely register a twinge.

The phone is warm in my paw. The ring goes on for a long time, and then the silence goes on even longer. It rings again. My heart’s beating faster. Lion Christ, don’t be so worried about it, I tell myself, for all the good that does. There’s a click, and the sound of breathing.

“Are you calling to tell me you have made your decision?”

The temperature in my apartment seems to drop ten degrees. My fur prickles. “I’ve told you my decision. I want to talk to Mom.”

“There is nothing you can say to her that you cannot say to me.”

“Oh, there’s a bunch of things.” I breathe faster. “You made it clear you don’t want to talk to me.”

“It is not that I don’t want to talk to you.”

I cut him off. “Really? Because walking out of a restaurant says that loud and clear.”

“If you thought that telling the newspapers would make us take you back…”

“I didn’t do that,” I snap.

“But you told your fox.”

“Of course.”

His voice is icy. “So. He told the papers.”

Shit. “I already talked to him about it. I took care of it.”

Dad growls. “This is personal, family business. It is not for the world to know.”

“I play in front of millions of people every week. Like it or not.” I find myself more passionately believing what I’m saying. “People are interested in my life. You’re part of that too.” I can’t believe I’m defending Lee.

“Interested is one thing. Prying is another.”

“Nobody pried into—look, put Mom on the phone.”

“You do not need to—”

“If you don’t, I’ll just call back tomorrow when you’re at work.”

“She will not pick up.”

“Yes, she will.”

He doesn’t respond to that. Then I hear him growl Mom’s name. A moment later, I hear her voice. “Devlin, what is it?”

“Mom.” She waits. I work myself up to saying what I wanted to. “Mom, can you…I really want to come home.”

“I want you to come home,” she says, softly.

“Please…talk to Dad.”

“Devlin, you must see reason. Your father just wants the best for you. This thing, it will not lead to happiness.”

“You don’t know that.” I squeeze my brand-new phone. “It already has led to happiness.”

“Not for us.”

“You already have a grand-cub from Gregory. I’m sure he’ll give you more. What else do you want?”

“We want to be a family.”

“So do I!” I shout it into the phone, then close my eyes and try to breathe more regularly. “So do I. So you can—”

She breaks in, her voice whispered and urgent. “I am trying to talk to your father,” she says. “It will take time. Please, be patient.”

“How much time?”

Her voice goes back to its normal register. “Really, it will be easier for everyone if you simply give up this fox. You must grow up.”

I understand that she can't talk freely in front of Dad. That just infuriates me even more. Why the hell can't she just stand up for me? What's so hard about that? I push away the vague memory of Dad's remark about hitting girlfriends, and growl. "I am grown up," I say. "Now it's Dad's turn."

Before she can say anything else, I hang up the phone. The urge to throw it across the room is overwhelming, but I keep it in check. I just throw the phone into the cushions.

I leave it there for the rest of the night. Call Lee? Maybe. He had something he wanted to talk to me about. Maybe it would take my mind off this. I text him: *Sorry, talked to parents, really frustrated.*

He replies quickly. *Need to talk?*

What would Lee say? He'd tell me to focus on football, like he has so many times. Like there's nothing I can do about my family. Or he'd talk about whatever he wanted to tell me. Still, it'd be good to hear his voice. So I call him.

"Hi," he says. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I growl the word out. "You had something to tell me?"

He pauses. "It can wait. What did they say?"

"Mom told me to grow up, that she's trying to work on Dad, but she can't really talk around him, and it's all wrong. It's like everything's falling apart."

"It's not," he says, soothing.

"No," I say. "It's just me, isn't it?" The apartment feels small and confining. I stalk from the door to the window and back. "Mom wanted to help, or did she? What can she really do if she's afraid to talk in front of him? Is she just gonna wait until he decides to change his mind? Dad never changes his mind once it's set."

"Never say never," Lee says, but I barely hear him.

"Gregory wanted to play baseball instead of doing the debate team. Dad harped on him for years even after he gave in. We had these friends, black bears, and the older one was caught

shoplifting. I wasn't allowed to say a word to him after that. Eight years, Lee."

"This is different," he says patiently.

"You know he still hates foreign cars? Ivan does all the foreign car work in the shop. Foreign cars! Seriously!"

"You're not a car," Lee says. "He didn't like you playing football, either, did he? But he was really proud of you at dinner."

I pace more quickly. "I just need to talk to him again. If I can get in his face, force him to confront me again... He can't walk away from me every time. I'll call him right now."

"Don't!" Lee sounds alarmed. "Give yourself time to cool down."

I make a strangled noise. "Fox—"

"For me?" His voice gets a little purr in it when I sigh. "You know I'm right."

I do. Even so, when we eventually hang up, I scroll to my parents' number in my address book. I stare at it, then snarl at myself and throw it back at the couch. There's beer in the fridge and a video game I can lose myself in. I have practice tomorrow and that's going real well. It's definitely better for me to just chill, play some UFL 2009, and go to bed. I shouldn't call them back.

So I pound digital football players into each other through three beers, and then I go to bed. The beer takes the edge off my fuming. I sleep well enough, and in the morning I get up with an ache where my anger used to be.

We stay late again on Thursday, but that'll be the last time before the game. We travel tomorrow, and Saturday's too close to the game to wear ourselves out. After showering, I'm doing the usual running through the day's practice in my head, but thoughts of my father keep creeping in. It's not as bad as last week, but the frustration still eats at me. I need to talk to someone. I have a voicemail and a text from Lee asking me to call him, but before I get home I want to talk to one of my friends on the team, just to get another point of view.

I can't really talk to Charm about serious stuff. Fisher's in physical therapy now. I like Ty and Pike and Brick, but we don't chat much. Gerrard, maybe, but he's all business. He did ask me last week what was bothering me. Then, it still hurt too much. Now, I can't bring myself to approach him.

He comes over to me, though, at the end of practice. "Here," he says, handing me a small package.

I open the box. "I've got an iPod already," I say, pulling it out. "But thanks."

"This has game film on it," he says. "We're gonna be on the road, so I had the coaching staff break it down." He taps the box with a blunt claw. "The teams we're gonna be hitting, broken down into folders by type of play. You can't get to specific players yet, but you should still be able to see enough to help you figure out patterns."

"Oh. Thanks." I drop it in my bag. "That's really cool."

"Use it," he says. "See you on the plane."

"Hang on," I say. "I'll walk out with you."

He tilts his head, whiskers flaring. While I'm packing up my bag, he says, "Whatever was happening...all done now?"

"Not really," I say. I heft the bag over my shoulder. "But I'm gonna have to deal with it, right?"

"You don't have to deal with it alone," he says. "I know you can, but...we got a lot of good guys on the team."

I nod. Maybe he wouldn't be so bad to talk to after all. So I say to him, casually, "Hey, what would you do if one of your kids is gay?"

His ears sweep toward me. He shrugs. "It's just part of their life, right? We can always talk about it. Long as they don't let it affect their career. But you can do that when you're straight, too. You see Charm? Going to end up with child support in a couple years. Or a disease."

"Okay, but I mean, what if they did something you weren't okay with? Drugs. What if one of your kids did pot or something?

And it didn't affect his work, but..."

He narrows his eyes. "Did you see one of them with pot that afternoon?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm just..." I sigh. "Is there anything one of 'em could do that you'd kick 'em out of the family?"

"Oh." He relaxes and studies me. "Family always comes back together. There's nothing you can do about it now. You're doing really good this week—no media distractions."

"They play that commercial still."

"Just let your agent take care of it and keep doing what you're doing on the field. New Kestle, we can take them. And don't worry about Corey," he says as if reading my mind. "They might give him a couple series just 'cause of the stag. You keep playing like this, your job's safe for the year."

The pure focus on the game is perfectly Gerrard. I feel his words sinking in all the way home. The apartment, when I get there, feels big enough for me again. Even so, the ache doesn't go away. I call Lee, but his phone goes right to voicemail. I tell him I'm doing a little better, and I'll call him from New Kestle when we get there.

Then I sit down to play video games again, but I keep staring at the phone. I never called my parents much this past year. So why do I want to, now that I can't? Why can't I just let it be what it is? If I think about the day-to-day life I lead, what's really changed? Dad might call after a game, but lately, I just felt like shouting at him anyway, especially when he went on about the gay rumors.

I toss the controller down and go outside. On the way down the street, I call Charm and ask if he wants to get together for a drink. He invites me to the bar he's already half-sloshed at. Honestly. Kickers. I join him, have one beer, and watch him chat up a vixen, a horse, and a pantheress. He makes one remark about finding me someone to hook up with, just to take the edge off. I tell him no. That's all it takes. Sometimes he really is a good friend.

By the time I get home, a little later than I'd intended ("we can

sleep on the plane," Charm says), I'm feeling more mellow. Maybe Dad does just need time. I know Thanksgiving's going to hurt. I just gotta keep my mind on football, and my fox. Between the two of them, I'll get through.

The flight to New Kestle goes as well as could be expected. We troop into the bus laughing and joking loudly. I've never been to New Kestle, so the vets point out the highlights of the city: the Sonoran liquor store, the strip club, the mega-church with the glittering silver dome. Some of the vets do, anyway; Gerrard is nose-deep in his iPod, watching plays. The hotel, at least, is in a more upscale, developed neighborhood a few blocks from their stadium. To our mild surprise, there are a few people with signs outside the hotel. When they see us get off the bus, they get more animated, standing up and bobbing their signs up and down.

"GOD HATES FAGS," one of them reads. "SODOMY = DAMNATION" another says. A third has a long list of sinners adorned with crosses: "FORNICATORS THIEVES LIARS ADULTERERS MURDERERS ACCEPT THE LION JESUS AND YE SHALL BE SAVED."

"Wow," Charm says casually, "who called the freak brigade?"

"Three guesses." I clench my fists. But the team around me is laughing, ignoring the signs. I spot Colin giving them what he probably thinks is a surreptitious thumbs-up. The nearest guy, a cougar, doesn't acknowledge him at all. Colin's grin falters; he lowers his ears and keeps walking. I relax my fists.

A hotel security guard, a big wolf whose nametag reads "Kagusaki," comes over to us. He spots me and singles me out. "Mister Miski?"

I nod. He holds out a paw. "I'm Kagu. Just wanted to apologize. They're off the hotel's private grounds, so..."

He grimaces. I take his paw and shake it. "It's okay," I say. "You get used to it." I know that's the sort of thing I'm supposed to say, even if I don't quite feel it yet.

"I'll make sure they don't bother you. Just ignore 'em, okay?"

“Sure.” I grin. “Thanks.”

“Oh, uh, one more thing…” He looks nervous, his tail curling down behind him. I wait, Charm looming over my shoulder. “Uh, could I get an autograph maybe?”

My grin gets wider. “Sure. Got a pen?”

“Oh, yeah!” He digs in his pocket and comes out with a ballpoint and a small notepad.

I scrawl, “Thanks for the help, Devlin Miski, #57” and return the pad. He beams and stuffs it back in his pocket.

“Thanks, Kagu,” I say. “Appreciate the help.”

“Take care, Mister Miski!” He waves as we head into the hotel.

We’ve got an hour or so ’til practice. I try to call Lee, but he must be on a plane or on the road. So I hang out with Charm and Ty, who’s brought his portable video game system, and we play video basketball until it’s time for practice.

New Kestle is more humid than Chevali. Not a lot, but enough that we’re all gulping water by the end of practice. Our locker room isn’t air-conditioned, but someone set up huge fans that we jostle for space in front of. A few guys don’t dress immediately out of the shower, because it feels cooler to let your fur air-dry. Three or four have developed a ritual of coming over wearing their Ultimate Fit gear to ask me how they look, posing like in the commercial. I tell them if they keep working out, they might make it to the bigs one day.

I know Lee’s on the east coast now, so I walk back to the hotel room right after dinner and call him before Charm gets back.

He’s in this college town about fifty miles outside Freestone. “You know Jamesbridge, right?”

“Never heard of it. What’s the college?”

“White State. I think it only admits arctics.”

I laugh. “Snow?”

“Hell yes. You wouldn’t know I had black on my paws, it’s that high.”

“I’d know.”

“Course you would.” He sighs. “I got a phone call.”

“From…Kinnel?”

“From your dad.”

I stare out the window. “What?”

He recounts the conversation briefly. “Lion Christ,” I say. “Why didn’t you tell me about this the other night?”

“Don’t call him.”

“Why are you telling me if you don’t want me to do anything?”

“Because I’m telling you everything, remember?”

I scratch at the glass of the window with a claw. “Oh, yeah.”

“He’ll give it up pretty soon.”

“What if he does out you? I mean, after getting so upset about personal business…fucking hypocrite.”

He sounds amused. “I’m out at work now. Worst that happens is I get some publicity. Dragons might not like that. But I’ll go through Harry—he’s our media guy—and make sure everything’s nice and sterile for the media. It’ll be okay. Worry about the Unicorns.”

“I’m not worried about them. They suck.”

“Yeah, well, they knocked Corey out for six weeks. Might be you this time.”

I snort. “I won’t try to tackle a stag by his antlers.”

“Okay, then. Don’t worry about me, don’t worry about your dad.”

“You’re not going to call him back, are you? Don’t call him back.”

He laughs. “No, I’m gonna leave it alone for a while. I know Thanksgiving’s gonna be hard for you.” He pauses. “If you can come up here…my father might join us.”

“Really?” My claws stop against the window.

He sighs. “It’s not definite. I didn’t say anything before, because he just said he might, but if it’d help you…”

“To have your father there?” My claws retract.

“Yeah, I know, it’s dumb.”

"No." I rub pads along the cool glass. "It's not. I think it's a nice idea. I liked your father. That one time. I'm just surprised that you want to invite him."

"Yeah." I can almost see him rubbing his ears, getting that resigned look in his eyes. "He's...going through some stuff with Mother. I sort of caused it."

"Wow, two families in one year." The words slip out before I can stop them.

"Thanks, stud." He says it dryly. "Maybe you should invite me back to Gerrard's. I can turn his kids against him or something."

"I didn't mean that."

"No, it's not...it's Mother, it's me, it's...you know, I'd better get to sleep. Got to get up early tomorrow."

"I'm sorry."

He huffs, or something. "You can make it up to me later."

"I will."

"With sex."

"I know." I grin.

"Night, tiger."

"Night, fox."

I sit back in bed flipping through the iPod Gerrard gave me, looking at film. It's hard to make out the figures on the tiny screen, and for the first five or ten minutes, I'm tempted to give up. But I think of Lee telling me to keep at it, and I manage to force myself to view play after play, again and again, and pretty soon I can see the patterns that are important. The actual players I can figure out later. I don't even hear Charm come in, I'm so caught up in it.

"Hey. Gramps!"

I blink and look up. The stallion's grinning down at me. "Got naked babes on there? Sorry! Dudes? Wait, sorry—your dude, whatsisname? Lee!"

He's really excited that he remembered. I set down the iPod, smiling. "No, just football film."

"Aw." He strips off his shirt and flops down onto the bed, which

creaks. “Does he send you naked pics of himself?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Um. I don’t know. Never really thought of it.”

He yawns. “You should ask.” Then he rolls over. Five minutes later, he’s snoring lightly. I will never understand how the fuck he does that.

But I’ve missed hanging out with him. Even if it’s just in a hotel room at night. It’s been a month since we were on the road, and Charm’s “whatever” attitude toward everything is pretty refreshing. Maybe I could ask him about family after all.

The next morning, though, he sleeps in while I eat breakfast, and then it’s football all day. Sprints, drills, film, plays, stations. We flop down in the locker room at the end of the afternoon. Gerrard grabs the linebackers for dinner—though Corey declines when he sees I’m going—and we hit a good Sonoran place, because there are even more of those in New Kestle than Chevali. It’s less colorful than the restaurant in Chevali, more spicy, and the margays who run it are all so familiar with each other, we decide they must be from the same family. There are no weasels, and they don’t make fancy margaritas.

They do, however, make strong ones. I get halfway through mine and realize I’d better not finish it. Gerrard doesn’t get one, but all the linemen do. The coyote keeps an eye on them, and I see him tell the waiter not to bring any more alcohol to the table.

The guys at the next table, a wolf and two coyotes, recognize us and call some good-natured taunts about how the Unicorns are gonna stomp us. We grin and wave back. Gerrard says we’re better than we were when we beat them in week three. His easy confidence makes us all relax. We believe we’re gonna win.

20

Time Expired (Lee)

I knew Dev hadn't completely forgiven me that easily. Little offhanded comments like "two families in one year" remind me that the leak to the tabloids is still between us, and probably always will be. But it's far from the only thing. In a way, the fights have made us stronger. We're aware of how much each of us can really screw things up when we want to. We've skated close to the edge more than once. We always come back.

That thought warms me, alone in my bed. I think about my father again, and whether it'd really make Dev feel better for him to be there. Any parent is better than none, I guess, and right now we've just got the one between us.

Father, private like me. Didn't really want to let me know what was going on with Mother and that Families United group. It explains a lot, actually: Mother's reluctance to talk to me at all, and Father's impatience with me. We're all so absorbed in our own lives that we don't really mind drifting apart. At least, I don't feel anything like Dev's heartache. Father doesn't really let on much beyond a kind of weary obligation to stay connected to his son.

I wonder if I could get Mother to calm down if I do what I'm doing with Paul. Tuesday, Paul ignored me. Wednesday, when I had to ask him about one of my prospects, he let out a typical remark about my inexperience, looked panicked for a moment, and then calmed down again when I didn't react any differently than

normal. The old relationship, the one that worked before, wins out if you let it.

Instead of shoving Dev in Mother's face and making her accept him, I could just go back to being gay in theory. That worked for two years. Of course, she didn't belong to Families United then. And the other major problem is that for both me and Dev, having the other around is "normal." My mother and his parents can't just ignore it. They could just pretend he's straight and I'm a "friend," but that doesn't feel honest to me, and I don't think it does to Dev, either.

He's lucky, though. He's got his team. However temporary a family it is, it was clear just from that afternoon at Gerrard's (and I am so glad I managed not to turn into a tail-wagging drooling fan) that the team functions like a family. And again, from what I hear, Dev is doing with them exactly what I'm doing with Paul. Everything's the same, I'm still the same guy. Eventually they fall back to their old routines.

I have plenty of time to think about this, driving around to two games on Saturday. They're good games; we're into the season where schools play within their conferences rather than beating up on small state colleges who are just in the game to get the paycheck. Dexter University has a really pretty campus, near the ocean, so I find a small coffee shop near the beach and write up my notes there.

Another gay football player wrote in to Dev's e-mail this week. But this one isn't in my region; he's actually close to Chevali, down at Kingman U. I could point him out to Brad, who covers his region for the Dragons, but I don't know how it would go, what I would say to him. Maybe I could tell him I found him in the directory. Would he assume I was sleeping with the kid? Or that Dev was? If he buys into the 'promiscuous gay' stereotype, then he might. And if I head that off by telling him I'm not, he'll wonder why I'm bringing it up. I haven't written the kid back. I don't think I'm going to.

Sunday begins at the Freestone airport. I booked an early flight, so I'm home by the time Dev's afternoon game starts, relaxing on the couch with a beer. Dev and the defense look great; the offense, not so much. They stall several times. Aston's overthrowing his receivers, looking nervous for some reason. Could be the Unicorns' defense, which is stouter than it was in week 3. They traded for a defensive end, and he's in Aston's face the whole first half, close enough that I'm sure Aston's smelling him every time he drops back to pass.

But the Unicorns can't do anything against the Firebirds' D. They run left, run right, can't get around the defense. That stag of theirs lowers his antlers and all the red-and-gold defenders sidestep him and tackle him from the side. Pike is coming up to speed, enough that they have to slide some men over to pay attention to him. This results in Sully, the nimble cougar at the other defensive end, forcing a fumble from the Unicorns' QB. Chevali recovers, and with the short field, Aston lets Jaws take it down for a score. Seven-zip at the half.

Aston finally calms down in the third. Coach must've said something right, because he comes out of the gate firing, mixing up passes and runs, and before the Unicorns know it, there's Ty dancing in the end zone with his second score of the year. New Kestle adjusts after that, but the Firebirds' D keeps clamping down on them. All they get is a long field goal.

Midway through the fourth, leading 14-3, they give Dev a rest and Corey goes in for a series. He jumps up and dances like an idiot after a standard tackle, which pisses me off. I go to the kitchen to fix a snack, and then I hear the commentators yell. I rush back into the living room.

They're just starting the replay: Corey leaping as the stag turns the corner around the line. Corey's a step slow, and the stag sees daylight, at least twenty more yards. But Corey grabs the guy by the antlers—which is legal—and spins him around out of bounds—which is also legal—and then throws his weight onto the stag's

chest and crushes him to the ground. Which is not. And the stag's not getting up.

Corey walks away pumping his arms as the crowd showers him with boos. When he turns back and sees the stag still lying there, he falters, but doesn't lose his smug posture.

They cut back to live action. A whole crowd of Unicorns surrounds the stag, who still hasn't moved. A coyote and a lion in training gear are working with him. The commentators sound scandalized.

"...vicious hit by Mitchell and it looks like the leg is definitely broken."

"You hate to see that, and they're not just going to be penalized on this drive. Mitchell's in an altercation with two Unicorns players, and he's outta here."

"More penalties coming from the league on this, I'm sure."

Kinnel calls right then, and doesn't even waste time saying hello. "Watching the game?"

"Yeah." I turn the sound down.

"Looks like your boy's job is safe for a while."

"I wasn't worried, but shit." I watch Dev trot back onto the field, adjusting his helmet. They cut back to the stag. Kinnel and I yell at the same time. "Christ!" I say, and Kinnel says something even more blasphemous. The leg is twisted, bent between the knee and ankle. A shard of white shows against the torn gold of the uniform. "It's like the Rich Luna injury."

Kinnel knows, of course, about the quarterback who famously had his leg shattered, ending his career. The injury leads any collection of Football's Hardest Hits. "Shit," Kinnel says. "Ain't quite that bad, but still. He's out for the season."

"No, not that bad," I say. "Just looks bad. But I dunno, it's usually six weeks for a broken leg. He could be back for the playoffs."

"I mean Mitchell. Deliberate late hit out of bounds? That picture's gonna be all over the highlights."

“The league won’t suspend him.”

“No, but as long as your boyfriend doesn’t bite through someone’s neck, he’s not gonna lose playing time. Look at Samuelson lay into Mitchell.”

Coach is yelling, berating Corey, who tries to walk away. Coach grabs him and holds him in place while he watches New Kestle run a play with the fifteen-yard penalty they got, then he yells at Corey some more.

“And nobody on the team went to support him.”

I remember how they all backed up Dev a few weeks ago. My tail wags. “Gerrard tried to break up the fight.”

“He has to do that.” We’re quiet, watching the stag carted off the field, and then Kinnel goes on. “Don’t think your boy’s job was in danger anyway. He’s looking good. Ribs all better?”

I feel a swell of pride. “He’s been workin’ hard.”

“Shows,” Kinnel says. “Any chance you could hook me up with some quotes tonight, give me an inside scoop on how the team reacts to Mitchell, how that all went down?”

I snort. “I’ll do what I can,” I say.

“I’m not losing interest in you,” he says. I can picture his grin.

“Really? I thought you were straight.”

“Whichever way the wind blows,” he says. “Nah, I still want your story, but I’m patient.” He pauses. “Anyway, I’m still deciding where I want to publish. Got a buddy at the Crystal City Herald. Could be a touching social-interest piece there. Those things soak up prizes like paper towels in a commercial.”

“Your plans have gotten bigger.” The Unicorns are playing hard. Dev’s back out, but his intelligence isn’t coming into play. It’s all tackling and execution, hard runs charging into the Firebirds’ line, quick passes like bullets hitting receivers. The Firebirds are only reacting, not anticipating, and the Unicorns capitalize on it. The stadium keeps showing the injured stag on the Jumbotron to fire up the team. It seems to be working.

“Listen: ‘Nobody approves of what he’s doing. Few people even

know about it. But Wiley Farrel has never been one to care what other people think of him. Except one person.' How do you like that?"

I curl my tail around into my lap, watching the game. "Touchdown."

"Glad you like it. Oh."

"I like that, too. Just feels weird hearing about myself in the third person." Do I really not care what people think of me?

The Unicorns kick the extra point. Dev doesn't need to run out and do his tricks. It's 14-10 Firebirds, four minutes to go. "Get used to it," Kinnel says.

"Hope they can hold on here," I say.

"Six and three is good enough to tie for top of the division," Kinnel says. "And Hellentown's padded their record against crappy teams. If Chevali beats 'em next week..."

"Don't jinx 'em." Aston hands off to Jaws. The Unicorns use all their timeouts, but after Jaws punches through them for another first down, they can't stop the clock any longer. At midfield, they toughen, just before the two-minute warning. They know their backs are against the wall. Aston tries a short pass on third and eight, and they gain six. The Firebirds punt.

New Kestle gets the ball back with 1:54 to go. They've got that last-minute desperation; added to that, they're playing mean, probably using the stag's injury as motivation. Their QB is inspired, whipping the ball to his receivers, completing four of his first five passes, driving down to the 30. From there, he takes a shot at the end zone; it sails long, above the outstretched paws of the nearest receiver. Vonni plays great defense on the next one, and the receiver loses precious seconds arguing for a penalty. The Jumbotron shows the stag watching from the training room, firing up the crowd.

The QB finally gets the receiver back to the line, but there's confusion. They don't get the play off in time, and have to walk back five yards on the delay of game penalty. On third, they try for

a short play to the slot, hoping to take advantage of the stretched-out defense. I see Dev anticipate, move, intercept—but he doesn't hold on, just swats the ball to the ground. The Unicorns have to go for it on fourth.

"No way they make this," Kinnel says.

"Don't jinx 'em," I repeat.

He laughs, just as the Unicorns send everyone deep. The quarterback has all kinds of time to look downfield, and then he launches a pass. I hold my breath. It arcs perfectly and comes down in the arms of one of their receivers, a lanky fox. Norton's got him wrapped up immediately, dropping him on the three-yard line.

"Well, shit," Kinnel says.

"I told you. Watch the clock. Watch the clock!" It's ticking down from five, to four, to three. The QB wants to spike the ball, to give them one more play. He takes the snap, slams the ball to the turf. Two seconds left—but the wideout and tight end were both getting into position when the center snapped the ball.

"They weren't set!" I yell, and at the same time, the referee throws a yellow flag.

"Nope," Kinnel says. "That's the ballgame."

We listen to the official. "Flag on the play. Too many players in motion, on the offense. By rule, ten seconds will be run off the game clock. The game is over."

"Six and three," Kinnel says. "Playoff-bound."

I give an exaggerated sigh. "If they beat Hellentown."

"Get back to me with that story."

"I will."

"And tell your guy he looks good." He pauses until I'm about to say something, which I don't, because I know he's waiting for me to. "On the field."

"Ha ha."

I leave Dev a congratulatory text for when he turns his phone back on: *6-3!* Then I sit back and watch the post-game shows. They

do a short segment on the Firebirds and their playoff hopes. The sports anchor, a lively ferret, says, “What’s those rumors I hear about the Firebirds? In position for the playoffs?” Then they cut to Dev saying, “Completely true,” from his coming-out press conference.

It makes me laugh. I wish I’d recorded it. They go on to talk about the Firebirds’ remaining schedule, focusing on the game in Hellentown next week. Both teams are 6-3, but if you ask me—and the sports anchors—the Firebirds are the better team. They credit Dev with a lot of the turnaround, even though Gerrard’s leadership is what’s really helping them out. And you can’t discount Samuelson’s influence on the team, either. Not to take anything away from Dev. He’s been terrific, and he’s getting better. But I think it’s Samuelson’s and Gerrard’s support that are allowing him to shine.

The sportscasters try to get various Firebirds to guarantee a win, but nobody will bite. Samuelson is really good about keeping a lid on the team that way, limiting media access as much as he’s allowed. I watch a little more of the segment, entering data from the weekend into my computer. Nothing exciting comes up on e-mail, either mine or Dev’s.

He calls, later, more excited than I’ve heard him since this whole family affair got started. I tell him how good he looked, and he tells me how good he felt, and he asks if I can come down to Hellentown. That’s way south of my region, though it is at least on the east coast, closer than New Kestle. So I don’t want to commit, especially since I’ll be able to see him in Port City the following weekend. But he’s charmingly insistent, even trying to convince me he feels lonely.

I tell him I’ll decide during the week. It’s good to hear him in somewhat better humor. I guess winning can cure a lot of things beyond the locker room. It helps there, too; he says the team’s all joking, out for drinks. I tell him to get back to them.

He calls me back sometime that night, but I was letting the

phone charge as I ran out to dinner, and I missed it. I don't notice 'til about two hours later, and by then, I'm guessing he's asleep. All he said on the voicemail was, "Nothing important, I'll tell you tomorrow. Love you." He didn't have to say that last part; his voice oozed it, soft and warm. So I don't worry about it.

Maybe if the Dragons win a game, I won't feel the same heavy weight looming over me as I go in to work. They lost again on Sunday, this time to Aventira in an embarrassing rout. I already hate Aventira as a rival, and for what their crowds did to Dev a few weeks ago. Now I get to come in with a renewed sense of hatred for them for a 38-6 loss.

"Fuckin' Chimaeras," I say amiably as Alex comes in.

He hangs up his coat and shakes his long ears, rubbing the cold out of one, then the other. "Yeah. Of course, we'd do the same to them."

"Wish we could. Did you go?"

He shakes his head. "Watched at a bar. You?"

"Caught the last half. Took an early flight."

He sits on the edge of his desk. "How were your games?"

I lean back, linking my paws behind my head. "Not bad. Better than a few weeks ago. Yours?"

"About the same."

We chat while he boots up. I write up some more notes on my games, remembering details as I talk to Alex. He's doing the same, telling me about his games in order to jog his memory. We do this until it's time for a coffee break, around ten-thirty, and when we get back from the local coffee house, there's an urgent e-mail waiting for me from Morty.

It just says, "Please meet me in my office as soon as you're back."

My fur prickles. This can't be a good meeting. I give him a quick call on the intercom to let him know I'm on my way, all the while shuffling through things I've done that might be meriting a reprimand. The remote working days? Probably not, because he

already talked to me, but what if Paul complained? My coming out? I don't think they can really do much about that, unless some other employee's lodged a complaint.

Walking down the hall, I wish I'd done a more thorough job of checking the news. What if Dev's father had made good on his threat? It wouldn't be front-page material. Would anyone else I know have seen it and called me? I try to figure out where it would have shown up that Morty would have seen it and I wouldn't have. And why would he need to talk to me, anyway?

Maybe it was nothing like that. Maybe he just wanted to talk about one of my prospects. This one cheetah at Dexter, Markissian, he'd had a great game and I'd recommended we jump him in our rankings. Maybe Morty wanted to question that. But then he'd wait for the team meeting, wouldn't he?

I pause outside his open doorway to put on a bright smile. I make sure my fur is smoothed down and any defiance is gone from the arch of my tail, and then I walk in.

The words, "Hi, boss," die in my throat. Sitting in front of Morty's desk, paws resting in his lap, is the general manager of the Hilltown Dragons, a tall, lanky rat. "Wiley," Morty says, "you know Mister Campbell."

"Yes, sir." I clear my throat.

"Mister Farrel, please have a seat," the rat says. He gestures to the other chair in front of Morty's desk.

My mouth is dry. I can't even think of anything jokey to say. I sit down, focusing most of my effort on keeping my tail and ears from flicking nervously.

Morty clears his throat. "Wiley, we have—"

"I'll handle this, Mort." Campbell turns in his chair to face me. "Mister Farrel, the front office has become aware that there may exist a long-standing relationship between you and a player in the league by the name of Devlin Miski."

21

Temptation (Dev)

Sunday night, we all go out and get a little tipsy, knowing we won't have to practice Monday. I call Lee from the bar Gerrard takes us out to. All I can think about is how awesome it felt to win, and how much I want to win next week, too. I want him to be there with me so I can share this feeling with him. He doesn't wanna commit, even when I tell him how lonely I'll be. He says I'll have Charm and Gerrard, and even when I say that they won't do those things he does, he just laughs softly.

I'm not sure why the guys seem itchy to get back to the hotel, but Gerrard breaks up the bar get-together after only a couple rounds. By the time I get off the phone with Lee, a bunch of them are already gone. "What gives?" I ask Carson, the only one not gone or preparing to leave.

He gives me a look, and then shrugs. "Couple guys went to a club," he says. "Guess there's not much else to do in New Kestle."

"It's barely nine-thirty." The last time we were on the road, in Crystal City, we were all keyed up for the season opener and everyone went to bed early. The Dragons always went their own way on road trips, but they did at home, too. I guess with this group of guys, I hadn't expected them to split up so fast after a win.

Carson's still here, at least, and just starting a beer, so I order one too. We chat, sparingly, about football, while the rest of the

team clears out. I keep the talk away from family, determined not to let myself lose the rush of winning just yet. An hour or so later, we share a town car back to the hotel.

The driver, a bat-eared fox, keeps flicking those huge ears back to us. “Say, boss,” he says, to neither of us in particular, “you want a good time, boss?”

“Just the hotel,” I say.

“Sure thing, boss. If you want, I took some of your friends to this club, nice club, good club, plenty girls there, boss.” His dark, beady eyes glance at me in the rear view mirror.

Carson sits impassive, staring out the window. “No, thanks,” I say.

“Okay, boss, okay, but look, you change your mind, I give you my card. You call me, I take you right there, boss. Okay? I take you no charge.”

“Fine.” Carson looks at me as I say that. We share a raised eyebrow. I grin, and I actually get a faint grin in return.

At the hotel, the fox thrusts business cards at both of us. We take ’em basically to shut him up. He waves cheerfully as he drives away. “Hell of a character,” I say. Carson drops the business card on the ground.

The picketing guys are gone. Even Kagu the wolf isn’t outside anymore. We stroll unmolested into the hotel lobby. It’s brighter than during the day, all the red glass lights lit, the chandeliers sparkling. I inhale the scent of floor cleaner and follow Carson toward the elevator.

As we pass the lounge, four people stand and approach us. All female, I see a moment before their scent hits me. There’s two coyotes, a desert rat, and a bobcat. All four of them are wearing tight clothes, their fur glossy and shaped around the shoulders, then short below that to make their arms look more slender. The bobcat struts out in front; the others hang back with hopeful jealous looks.

“Hi,” the bobcat says. “If you boys are lonely tonight…”

Carson doesn't even stop. I hesitate, so she turns her attention on me. "What about you?" Her paw rests lightly on my arm.

"No, it's okay." I try to keep going.

She starts to protest, but one of the coyotes says, "Forget it, Jasmine. He's not into girls."

Her eyes narrow, her lip curls. She steps back, rolling her eyes theatrically before turning with the others. I have to resist the urge to call after them, *And I wouldn't be interested in you anyway.*

Carson's already at the elevators. I notice Kagu hurrying toward me across the lobby, so I stop and wait for him.

"It's okay," I say, gesturing to the girls. "They're not bothering me any more."

He comes to a halt, panting. "No, it's not that, Mister Miski," he says. "There's a fox in the bar. He says he's a friend of yours. He left a message with your room, but since I saw you, I thought I could save you a trip up."

"Thanks." I smile at him. My heart skips a beat. It would be just like Lee to surprise me by flying down here, then acting all coy and stuff when I try to get him to come visit me next weekend. I get a tingling in my sheath. I'd love to have my arms around him, my cock under his tail. "I'll go see him now."

He beams. I wave, and walk quickly to the bar, adjusting my pants.

Beneath the 1970s-lime green logo, I scan the place. It's clean and functional, blue carpet, wood-paneled walls; nothing really stands out about it. Two coyotes sit at the bar watching the evening game. I recognize the Yerba Whalers' uniforms, and a moment later I see Highbourne's russet and navy. The score's 13-10 Yerba right now. A few other people are watching from tables: two rats and a porcupine, all chatting together, and a lion sitting alone at another table. Behind him, a fennec fox types on a smartphone, ignoring the game and the other people.

There's no other foxes in the room. I stare at the fennec, willing him to look up in case he's the one Kagu meant. I don't know him,

but maybe he knows me from somewhere and I've just forgotten.

He doesn't look up. I take a step inside, my tail lashing with a little anxiety. Maybe Lee went up to the room. If anyone could've cajoled the hotel into giving him the room number...or maybe he got hold of Charm, and Charm gave him a key.

"Looking for me, handsome?"

I turn. In one of the booths behind me, a young fox in a light green neck-scarf raises a paw. He's smiling. I'm so set on seeing Lee that my first thought is, I didn't know Lee had a blue polo shirt like that. But the voice is too high, the muzzle too short, the eyes brown rather than blue. I fight off the disappointment, the wish that Lee actually were here with me, and walk over to the table.

Faint recognition tickles at my memory as the fox looks up. He tilts his muzzle. "Don't tell me you've forgotten me already."

I point at the neck scarf. "Moose ascot."

"Close enough." He snickers. "Argonne."

"Argonne ascot, then." I stay standing. "What do you want?"

"My *name's* Argonne," he says, fingering his ascot. "This is sea foam. We met outside your stadium a few weeks ago?"

"Right, I remember. So what...?"

He raises his martini glass. "I like to follow the team around, sometimes. The guys are much more...friendly, away from home. But I wanted to see you specifically."

I shrug, and start to walk away. "Not interested."

"I read the tabloids," he calls.

I freeze. My tail lashes behind me. He goes on. "To hell with your family," he says. He takes a drink of the martini in front of him, and sets it down. "My folks threw me out into the street when I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I turned out okay." He dips his muzzle, laps at the martini.

I can't think of a polite way to argue with him. "Well, uh, thanks."

He looks up and gives me a sly smile. "Is your boyfriend here?"

I start to shake my head. Then I stop. “I’m sorry about your family,” I say. “I gotta get to bed.”

The martini glass rises, tips, empties into his muzzle. He stands up. “Need company? I still have plenty of energy left.” His eyes linger on me.

I narrow my eyes. “I’m good.” I turn and stalk out of the bar.

I’m at the elevator when he catches me. “You absolutely sure?” he purrs, standing on tiptoe so his slender muzzle reaches my ear. He smells like a flower I can’t quite place.

“Absolutely.” I step back and wave to Kagu, getting his attention. He starts over.

“Oh, don’t be like that.” Argonne pouts, or mock-pouts, I don’t much care which. “You don’t need him to protect you from li’l ol’ me.”

“It’s not to protect me.” I look over his shoulder at the guard. “It’s to protect you.”

He gives me that cocky smile, stepping closer. His scent infuses the air. Just as I’m about to push him back, he leans up to kiss me, right on the lips. His paw gropes me between the legs, finding me half-hard. “Had to be done,” he whispers.

Before I can stop myself, I’ve shoved him, sending him staggering back. Kagu arrives, looking warily from the shock on my muzzle to the innocent-looking fox recovering his balance. I’m pretty sure the fox’s body hid his grope from the guard. Pretty sure. “Everything okay, Mister Miski?”

“No,” I say. “I mean. I’m fine.” My pulse hammers. Argonne watches, smug in the knowledge that I won’t deck him while Kagu’s standing right here. “This fox is harassing me. Get him out of here. Don’t let him back in while we’re here.”

His eyes dark, the wolf puts a large paw on the slender fox’s shoulder. “Come on,” he says. “We’re gonna take a visit to the security office. I don’t want to see you bothering Mister Miski again. Or anyone else.”

“Oh, I already bothered someone else,” Argonne says. He licks

his lips as Kagu pushes him away, and winks at me. “Wouldn’t you like to know who?”

I watch Kagu propel him along the lobby, past another fox sitting there, who looks up with flattened ears as Argonne swishes past him. I turn my attention to him as the other two exit out the lobby doors, my heart skipping a quick beat. But as he turns to stare at me, I recognize Colin.

Lion Christ. Did he see the other fox grope me? I wait, but he doesn’t get up, so I step into the elevator and slam the button for my floor.

I’m shaking a little bit as the doors close, only because Argonne was so close and fuck, he really reminded me of Lee. My sheath still tingles from his touch. I lean back and close my eyes. It’s okay. I don’t have to worry about it any more. I don’t have to worry about him any more.

As I calm down, his other comments come back to me, about ‘friendly’ players and having visited someone else. Now I’m wondering. If Lee were here, we could maybe walk along the hall and see whose room the fox’s scent was in, but I doubt I can track it that easily. Besides, what the hell would I do if I knew, anyway? I of all people should be considerate enough not to pry into secrets.

It’s quiet as I leave the elevator and walk down the hall—most of the guys are out at clubs, I guess, or maybe asleep already. I know we didn’t get all the rooms on our floor, but the hotel cleared out the other ones for us. The lights are dim in the hallway, my feet silent on the plush carpet.

I stop after passing a door, not sure why. I perk my ears to the silence, and then hear a murmur underneath it. A familiar voice. I strain to listen without putting my ear to the door. Everything goes silent, and then I hear it again.

It’s only Gerrard. Probably talking to Carson about something. I take a step forward, and then realize something: I don’t think this is their room. A moment later, I hear an answering voice, louder. High-pitched. Female.

Oh. I walk on, to Charm's and my room. It's empty, no surprise. I strip, grab my iPod, and lie back on the bed. I try to look at game film, but I can't concentrate. After a few minutes, I put it aside.

In bed, I lie back and stare at the ceiling, wondering if someone on the team might be gay. Or maybe he's just gay enough to not care who's sucking his dick. The second idea seems more likely. But I hold on to the first. It makes me feel good, more relaxed, the way I used to around my family. Like someone else on the team might understand what I'm going through, and maybe will eventually have the balls to come out to me.

What if it was Colin? Did he look guilty when he saw Argonne? His ears were flat, for sure, but they always kind of are, these days. But then, why would he have been sitting in the lobby? Unless...he had to go somewhere else to get blown, and was waiting to go back to his room?

Not worth thinking about, though outing Colin as gay is a delightful fantasy. I call Lee, to share that fantasy, tell him about Argonne, and maybe to jerk off with him over the phone, because I feel like getting off and I don't want to do it myself right after seeing the other fox. He doesn't pick up, so I just tell him I'll call him tomorrow. I let him know I love him, and maybe that's all I really needed to do. It makes me feel better about everything.

The longer I lie there, thinking about guys being gay and getting blown by foxes, the harder I get. So I have to tell myself that I'm not jerking off because I'm thinking of Argonne. He's gone, and I've got Lee's voice in my ears. 'Hi, it's Wiley, leave a message' is not the sexiest thing he's ever said to me, but it works. It doesn't take me long to leave him a nice, warm, sticky message on my stomach. Pleasantly exhausted, I clean up and fall asleep before Charm comes back.

The next day, I'm up before he is, out the door while he's still snoring. I head down for breakfast and am almost inside the restaurant before I notice someone sitting just outside, nose buried in a newspaper, chocolate-pointed ears sticking up above it.

Hope, again, flickers in me. I snort at myself being stupid. It's not Lee, no matter how much I want it to be. It's probably Vonni. "Hey," I say, leaning against the wall.

The paper lowers, revealing Colin's muzzle. He doesn't say anything.

"Oh, sorry." I take a step back. "I thought you were..."

"Your 'friend' from last night?" He snorts and lifts his paper again.

"He's not my friend," I say, "or did you miss the part where I had him thrown out?"

He snorts. "So you aren't a sodomite *and* a cheater. Congratulations."

"At least I'm not a hypocrite," I say, and then lean closer. "So why were you down in the lobby last night, anyway? At the same time he was?"

He stares at me, the paper falling to his lap. "Are you...seriously...?"

"I won't tell anyone," I say, in what I hope is a reassuringly confidential tone.

For another moment, he just stares, and then he stands up, and if he could kill with just his eyes, I think I'd be dead. "Listen to me," he hisses. "You may think you know some things about me, but if you ever, ever insinuate—"

Toeclicks on the marble of the lobby floor interrupt him. He looks around my shoulder, and I hear Zillo's voice. "Hey, Colin." He gets closer, and the toeclicks pause. "Um. You going to breakfast?"

I step back, look at Colin's sour expression, and decide to take a small, petty revenge. I turn to Zillo. "Yeah. Want to join me?"

The coyote's uncertain expression brightens, though he glances at Colin. "Uh, sure," he says. "Yeah. Hey, Colin, thanks for clearing out of the room last night."

Colin stares at Zillo. He doesn't say anything. Then he sits down, very deliberately, and picks up his paper. A moment later,

not even his ears are visible.

Zillo and I don't say much until we sit down. His tail curls below him until we get to the table, when he lets it swing behind him. "Don't be hard on Colin," he says. "He believes what he believes."

"You don't?"

He shrugs. "I don't have to live with ya. Just play football together. You keep your paws away from me, and I guess, y'know..." He jams a forkful of bacon into his muzzle and chews. "Rather be playin' with you than against ya."

"Leave it on the field, huh?" As half-hearted as the sentiment is, I'm touched. Gerrard's attitude must be rubbing off on the team. I look around for him, but Zillo's the only coyote in the buffet. I guess Gerrard must be sleeping off the sex.

Part of me is thinking, I wanted someone to celebrate with last night. I could've just taken Argonne up to the room and let him suck me off, or maybe I could've fucked him, instead of just jerking off. It wouldn't have been any different from what Gerrard did, or what Charm does every other night, for that matter. Lee and I aren't really married.

That thought sits wrong as soon as I think it. No, we're not married. We're as good as, though. I mean, for me to do anything with Argonne would be cheating. Doesn't that mean we're married? More married than Gerrard, or Fisher—he never did cheat on Gena this year, that I saw, but he told me stories.

When Gerrard does finally arrive, he sits near us. "Hey," he says, and Zillo and I nod back and keep eating. I've walked through road hotel lobbies a dozen times. I've seen the girls there. I know what goes on. I even knew it went on with Gerrard. But somehow, after having met his family, I don't feel like I can just laugh it off like I used to.

Zillo's words come back then. Leave it on the field, right? I don't have to live with him. Everyone does things other guys don't get, don't share, or don't approve of. We don't have to live

together, just play together. Whatever Gerrard's doing after the game is between him and Angela. It's what he does during the game that matters. And Gerrard's been so good about respecting me and sticking up for me, I can't turn around and start lecturing him. So I just say, "Practice today?"

"Yep." He looks around. "Good to see not everyone was out 'til stupid o'clock."

I sniff at a piece of salmon on my toast and then shove it in my mouth. "Maybe some of us just don't need ten hours of sleep." I'm pretty happy when he chuckles.

Later, when Vonni and Norton come down yawning, I find out that they went to the bat-eared fox's friend's club. "Totally lame," Vonni says, and jerks a thumb at Norton. "Nobody wanted to dance with Spots."

"I had fun," Norton says.

"Yeah, you came back here alone, didn't you?"

"So did I," I say. Vonni raises his eyebrows, but Norton gives me a little smile.

"Whaddya talkin' about?" Pike calls from two tables over. "I had two gals all night and Kodi here got lucky first thing!" He claps a paw on the brown bear's shoulder. Kodi looks embarrassed, but smiles sheepishly.

"Yeah well," Vonni says. "Maybe the gals there just like their guys big."

That's the cue for Pike to flex his biceps, and soon everybody's laughing. Even the normally quiet Carson and Kodi are having fun. To top it off, Gerrard actually cracks a smile, and gets the biggest laugh when Charm convinces him to roll up his shirt sleeve and flex, and he does it right under the stallion's nose.

The good mood carries over into the day. Some of the guys are tired or hung over, but the practice goes great. We're still jazzed from winning. The practice squad is loose, excited to be out on the field. Gerrard, Carson, and I mesh, anticipating each other's movements. We talk constantly between plays and then guess right

on almost every play. We kid that we know the guys so well because we've been studying film of them.

Mid-afternoon, we take a break. Because it's not a real practice, I have my cell phone on. I skip through the usual few messages from Ogleby, file away some interview requests for later in the day, and give Lee a call.

"Hi," he says.

His voice is flat, subdued, but it sounds like he's about to laugh. Not a real laugh, a nervous, I-don't-know-what-else-to-do laugh. He doesn't do that often. My fur prickles. "What's wrong?"

"You know how it sucks that we both work weekends?"

Is this about him coming to Hellentown? "Yeah?"

"Don't have that problem any more."

I frown. "What happened?"

"I got fired."

"What?" I try to think. "Just you, or the whole staff? I haven't seen the news..."

"No, it's just me. I finished the paperwork an hour ago."

"What happened?"

"I didn't disclose my relationship with you."

"Oh." I sit down on the bench in the locker room. "And when you came out..."

"No. Someone called them."

My claws scrape the plastic of the phone. "Who?"

"Someone anonymous. Who knows about us and knows I work for the Dragons."

Oh, shit. I can't think of any words to say. I know who it has to have been, after my father threatened him with exposure.

Lee goes on a moment later. "It's done. I mean, I deserved it. I should've disclosed the relationship."

"You told Morty."

"Never specifically. He probably figured it out, but..." Lee sighs. "He doesn't deserve to be fired. He told me he'd put in a good word for me with a couple other clubs who might be looking.

Maybe I can get on with a college."

"Wait, did he get fired?"

"No. I told Campbell I hadn't told anyone else at work." He tells me how he cleaned out his desk, how his friend Alex took him out to lunch, how he turned over all his files to Morty and signed a long non-disclosure agreement, a non-compete agreement, and some other nons I don't catch.

I lean my elbows on my knees. Jake, from the practice squad, comes over to see if I'm ready to go back. I wave him away. "So...how do you feel?"

He chuckles. Dry, humorless. "Kind of numb. A little like I got caught with my paw in the cookie jar."

Me, I just feel this nausea, and a little bit of falling-backward-off-my-chair unease. But I don't want to tell him that. I need to be strong. "It'll be okay," I say. "Hey, you can come stay at my place."

"I've got some savings," he says. "Apartment's paid for a few months."

"Don't you want to move down?"

"Look, I kinda want to digest this. I have some time to figure out my next move."

"Okay. Yeah, I get that." I breathe in, make myself more confident than I feel. "It's gonna be okay, fox. You're good, you'll find another job. Come to Hellentown next weekend."

He doesn't say anything right away. "We'll see," he says, finally.

I have to remind myself that getting fired probably sucks. All through training camp I was terrified of being cut. But I want to see him so badly that I can't stop myself. "I'll get you a good seat. Up close. We can go out to dinner, just the two of us. Look up some good restaurants there."

"We'll see, stud."

Gerrard walks in. He gestures to me. "Look, I gotta go. We're doing an extra practice."

"Okay," he says. "I'll be here."

“I’ll call you tonight.” I pause, with Gerrard looking at me. I stand up. “Love you,” I say, not looking at Gerrard, but not hiding the words either.

“Oh, I love you too, stud,” he says. “I just need some time to deal with this.”

“I’ll talk to you soon.”

Gerrard raises an eyebrow as I hang up. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” I follow him out. He doesn’t say anything. “Lee got fired,” I say as we walk out into the sunshine.

He stops. His tall ears swivel toward me. His eyes stay focused on the field, where the rest of the guys are waiting for us. After a second, he says, “What happened?”

“Someone called the Dragons. Told them he was dating me when I was drafted.”

The expression on his long muzzle doesn’t change. His tail swings from side to side, lazily. “Shitty thing to do.”

“Do you know…” I try to frame the question. He flicks an ear. “Anyone who was at your place, that afternoon. Did anyone, maybe…”

Now he turns his head to fix me with one brown eye. “Nobody’s said anything to me.” He looks away, like he’s thinking of something to say. “Is he gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m trying to convince him to move down with me.”

“Long as it doesn’t become a distraction.”

We walk toward the other guys again. Motivated by God-knows-what, I say, “Hey. Thanks.”

The coyote turns, gives me a long grin. “You get pretty caught up in off-the-field stuff.”

I spread my paws. “I can’t help it.”

“Work on it.” He points back to the locker room as the guys come up to meet us. “Leave it in there, and let’s go.”

22

Game Plan (Lee)

Click.

I stare at the phone in my paw. I didn't want to give Dev all the details about my afternoon. It's just so depressing. I sleepwalked through it, almost, my ears down the whole time. It was like a punishment that drags on for hours. Going through spreadsheets with Morty, signing agreements not to discuss anything with other clubs, a formal expulsion that has a horrible feel of ritual about it. Here you go, you've done something wrong just like all the others before you, this is what we do with people like you. At least Dev got an emotional family scene in a restaurant. I just got paperwork and pity.

All the guys came by to wish me well. Morty and Campbell said they wouldn't tell anyone why I was let go. They'll make it about budget, about performance of draftees. Newest guy gets axed as motivation to the rest of the staff. But I told Alex, over lunch, and I swore to him several times that I didn't change Dev's evaluation because I was sleeping with him.

"You know," he said then, pointing his fork at me, "if anything, his performance now shows that you were right."

I know I was right. But he didn't do anything with the Dragons, and I have to disclose relationships anyway, because I shouldn't even have been allowed to participate in his evaluation. I didn't officially, but I was interning then. I do think they're on thin ice,

perhaps open to a lawsuit, but I don't want to do that. Morty said he'll send me a list of guys to talk to, in a couple days. It goes without saying that when I do, I'll tell them everything. But I doubt anyone will take me on this season. Maybe not until after the draft.

I haven't gone back to the apartment yet. I'm in a coffee shop between the Dragons' office and the apartment, deserted in mid-afternoon. From my corner, I watch the baristas, too far to overhear me even if they weren't small-eared otters. They chatter happily back and forth, loudly, about their plans for that evening, every so often sneaking a look over at me to check that I'm not sleeping or stealing.

I nurse the latte for a good hour, occupying my mind by alternating between feeling sorry for myself and thinking about my prospects. Would this have happened if I weren't gay? If I were female, with an eye for college football? Well, no. Because first of all, it's such a boy's club that I doubt I'd have been hired in the first place. And secondly, I would've been asked immediately if I were sleeping with any of the players.

But still, it wouldn't have come up if someone hadn't phoned them. I have a good idea who it was. My fingers play with the phone again. I could call them, give Mikhail a piece of my mind. I know it wouldn't solve anything, and I know that in a couple hours, or a couple days, I'm going to want it more than anything else. I'm going to need to keep myself from calling, then.

I flip through other numbers. Kinnel. I'm not ready to call him yet. My father. Not yet. Salim. I pause on that one. He'd be a good one to talk to right now. I give him a try, but he's probably at work, because he doesn't pick up.

So I finish my latte and go out to a movie. When that finishes, I grab a fast food dinner and then go to another movie. On the way home, I realize that all I remember about the movies is their titles and some explosions.

Tuesday Dev's in Hellentown. Practices are going well, he says, and Corey's been assigned to the third team for the foreseeable

future for his stunt with the running back. Coach said something to them about how personal grudges don't get put ahead of the team. Dev says Colin looked at him when Coach said that, and I tell him not to read too much into it. Colin's smart enough to know that his image isn't good enough to handle being the homophobe in the locker room, and nobody else there seems inclined to take on that role.

When I think about it, it's amazing how quickly that issue has faded into the background. Dev could've gotten sidetracked by interviews and endorsements, but he concentrated and is building himself a good football career. I'm so proud of him that I almost tell him so. He'd just laugh, though, and wonder why I'm proud that Colin's giving him the stink-eye.

He tries to get me to come visit him again, to move in with him. How do I tell him that that feels like giving up to me, that I don't want my life to be nothing but being his boyfriend? I have a life here, no matter how much it's falling apart, and I can't just pick up and leave. That'd be giving up, and as depressed as I am, I'm not ready to do that just yet. I might still visit him in Hellentown, but I want to wait and see if Morty turns up anyone I can talk to this weekend.

Tuesday evening, the anger kicks in. I've thrown it around in my head so many times that I know this isn't fair, I know it shouldn't have happened to me, and I want someone to pay for it. Twice I grab my phone and flip to Dev's home number before stopping myself.

Wedenesday, Morty sends me two names and phone numbers. One is the guy in Yerba, the other one in—I have to laugh—New Kestle, of all places. About the New Kestle guy, he says, "They're desperate to turn that team around, and Cael's a good guy." As far as Yerba goes, they're already good, but he knows the director of college scouting, and besides, he says, "It's Yerba, they don't blink an eye at your lifestyle."

"When should I call?" I ask.

“Give it a few days. I called ’em both to see if they need someone this season, but they’re covered. If they like you, though, they might bring you in to work with the team. I wouldn’t count on that with the Unicorns, though. They might all be gone after the season. That’s why I gave you Cael’s number. He’s the GM.”

“Oh.” I scratch behind my ear. “Pity I couldn’t get in at Chevali. I don’t know if they’d like me dating another player in the division at New Kestle.”

“I can call Chevali if you want.” He coughs. “Dunno anyone over there, but I can try.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“So how you holdin’ up? You wanna do lunch?”

I start to say yes, then catch myself. “You’ve already done a lot for me, but thanks.”

He snorts. “Ain’t asking you to lunch to do somethin’ for you.”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“Hey,” he says. “This ain’t because you ain’t a good scout. You are.”

“I know,” I say. “I get my hard cast off today.”

“Oh. You still on our insurance, right?”

“Hell, yes.”

He coughs again. “Okay, then. See you tomorrow.”

When the cast comes off, my paw feels terrific and looks like shit. The first thing I want to do is soak it in cold water, which I’m not allowed to do yet, but the nurse does sponge it off, getting the fur unmatted and getting the worst of the crud out of it. Then there’s a small splint and some black bandages, which match my paw color well. Even though it’s barely more mobile than it was, it still feels tons better. And they give me the old cast, with all the signatures on it. Turning it over reminds me of all the guys on the team that afternoon, how good it felt to be one of the ‘wives.’ Despite being fired, by the time I walk out of the office, I’m smiling.

I go to see another action movie that night. Inspired by my

paw's release from its prison, I run through some aikido again. The moves are starting to come back pretty well. Even though I'm back at a beginner level, just the physical motion does me good. I should maybe go out and run.

Maybe Morty will want to toss a ball around tomorrow. There's a gym near the office. I should stop by there and join it. But if I did, I'd have to make sure it has branches in other cities. What if I do end up moving to Yerba, or New Kestle, or Chevali? Then there'd be no tossing a ball around with Morty, or Alex. No lunchtime meetings, nothing. Of course, there's also no job here, and it's not like I can just go down the street to the next pro football team.

I hate not knowing where I'm going to be living in two months, or six months, or a year. I might turn up a job next month. Morty might get fired from the Dragons and bring me on at his next gig. The idea of living with Dev is really attractive, for obvious reasons, but what would it mean to my career?

My thoughts are not very good company. I want to call Dev again, but he's going to be practicing until tonight. If I call Kinnel, he's going to want to write it up. As attractive as that sounds, I have a vision of some tabloid shrieking about how I cried for an hour after being fired. I can't admit to my father that I got fired. I call Salim Wednesday night and get fifteen minutes of sympathy before he has to go. When I hang up, my tail curls between my legs and my shoulders slump. Even though it's only nine-thirty, I crawl up my ladder and into bed.

Thursday afternoon, lunch with Morty is great. For one thing, Jeffrey's makes incredible greasy burgers. You can't feel sorry for yourself while eating one. You just can't. (Afterwards—that's a different story.) For another, it gets me out of the apartment and out into the day, and the weather is surprisingly nice for Hilltown in the fall. You can actually tell there's a sun behind the clouds.

And for a third, Morty's incredibly encouraging about my future in scouting. "Emmanuel over at Yerba, he's a good guy, and a fox

too. He as much as said he wanted to talk to you in a month or so, when the college season winds down, thinks you could do some work with the community there, too. He says they been talking about trying to trade for Miski in the off-season anyway. Great community opportunities, and they could use a good outside linebacker."

"Dev could use another year with Marvell and Samuelson," I say, but the prospect of working in the same city is enticing.

"Chevali, they ain't interested. But there's a couple schools down thataway. Some big, some small, but they all go for guys with pro scouting experience. Could work there 'til something opens up in Chevali maybe."

I nod. "You really think they'd take me?"

He laughs and lights up a cigarette, careful to keep the smoke away from me. I cover my nose in exaggerated pain anyway. "Hell, I'm thinkin' I might want you to go work at a college so you'll be available when I move on." He winks at me. "You're a damn sight better'n Brad, and in another year you'll be better'n Alex. You and Paul are about the only ones I'd take with me."

“Thanks.” I look at the smoke-colored muzzle where the fur used to be white, the rough eyes that always look tired, except when he’s talking football, the lashing of his tail like a whip cracking, as if the tip is lagging and has to catch up to the base. I think about the crude ethnic jokes, the wealth of knowledge, the

rough, sincere friendship. “I’d work with you again in a heartbeat.”

“These things come around,” he says. “Even Paul was sayin’ today that he misses ya. So you never know.”

My ears lift. “Really?”

He nods. “Said you’re a pain in the ass, but you know your shit.”

That gets a grin out of me. “He’s kind of an ass, but he’s a good guy.”

“Hell, I’m kind of an ass, come right down to it.” Morty puffs a cloud of smoke into the air. It tickles my nose. “But you’re okay. You don’t take any shit.”

“I give it. Bam.” I punch the air in front of me. Morty raises an eyebrow, so I explain. “Been going to a lot of action movies. I think. Don’t really remember.”

“Hey. I know when I got fired, I lived in the bar for a week. You get over it.” He points a finger. “You want my advice? You should do something.”

“Besides spend ten bucks a pop going to movies I ignore?”

“You go to the Champion on Mulberry, it’s only five bucks.”

“For crappy second-run films in a smelly room with a sticky floor.”

He taps his nose. “Advantages of killin’ your nose with smoke.”

“Thanks.” I wave my paw in front of my nose, though he’s being good about blowing the smoke in the other direction. “I’ll keep my sense of smell.”

“Spend time with family, maybe. Practice golf. Play tennis. I dunno, what do you do for fun? Video games?”

“Mess with reporters.” I smooth my whiskers back. “Movies, too. Back in college I used to hang with friends at coffee shops and diners. Don’t really do much of that anymore. I think I spend most of my time on planes these days.”

“Go somewhere nice. Relax.” He takes a drag of the cigarette and stubs it out. “Hell, chances are we’re gonna all be joining ya on the dole come January. Fuckin’ Hochsfeld.”

Hochsfeld is the bear the Dragons took with their number three pick in the draft, who was supposed to anchor the defensive line. He played the first three games and allowed a team-record fifteen sacks in those games. He's now drawing a huge contract on the bench. When management criticizes the scouting team now, they say, "Don't pull another Hochsfeld."

"Just wait," I say. "Trade him in the off-season and he'll get motivated and start performing."

He coughs. "Goddamn kids. Never know how good they got it." He checks his phone. "Ah, I should get back."

"Give my best to the gang." A wave of gloom lowers my ears. Morty's going back to his job; me, I'm sitting in a greasy burger joint starting to wonder if I can stomach seeing the same movie I saw three days ago. At least I have a phone call with Dev to look forward to.

Do something, Morty says. I could fly down to Hellentown, get a cheap motel, hang around Dev all the time and try to help him. But he's doing well on his own. I'd probably be more of a disruption than anything else.

One thing I could be doing is watching as many college and pro games as I can, compiling scouting reports to prepare for future interviews. Which fills up my weekends nicely, and the occasional Thursday night when college games are on, but leaves giant gaping holes in the rest of the week.

I walk back slowly through the sunshine, eyeing the clouds on the horizon and thinking that not even a sunny day lasts long in Hilltown. It's warm in Hellentown now; it's warm in Chevali. I fluff up my fur and pull my coat tight against the wind.

Spend time with family. Hah. If I call my father, he won't be able to keep the "I told you so" out of his voice. Dropped out of college, risked it all on this job, and now I don't even have that. Dev's the only real family I have.

Once again my mind drifts back to Mikhail and the vague idea I had about talking to him. The idea fades out in a surge of anger

over his casual phone call that cost me my job. No matter what Morty says, I can't be sure I'll ever get something back. I dropped out of college for this. I didn't know if it would ever pay, but I had faith in myself. That was my decision. This was forced on me.

I could go back to college, I guess. See if Forester will take me for the spring term, make up a class, get my degree. Maybe I could apply to a school in Chevali for the spring term, live with Dev for a bit. The prospect isn't as frightening if I actually have a life to live, if I'm not just being a kept fox in his apartment.

Even so, that still leaves me two months to stew. In front of my apartment door, I reach for the handle and then turn away, down the street to a coffee shop. I don't want to sit up there with nothing to do again. My paws are itching for activity. Especially the left one, under the bandages.

Vanilla latte in paw, I sit down in the sun. I feel like talking to someone, so I take out my phone and call Kinnel, because he's the only one I can think of who'll answer at three in the afternoon.

"Hey," he says. "I was gonna call you tonight. You got that story for me?"

"Story?" I frown.

"Mitchell, the hit. The stag's out for the rest of the season, but I ain't heard what's going on with Mitchell."

"Oh." I turn my ears away from the noise of the coffee shop, toward the sunlight. "Sorry. I've been a bit distracted this week. Mitchell got demoted to third team, I heard. Dev didn't know anything else about how it happened. He just said Corey doesn't sound like he regrets it at all. He says he's even now."

"Grade-school karma."

"An eye for an eye."

"Makes everyone blind." He chuckles. "So what's got you distracted?"

I sigh. The need to talk overrides my worry about him writing it up. "I got fired."

I tell him the story, abbreviated, and then fill in the

abbreviations. His first reaction is predictable. “So I can write your story now, right? This is great. Got the whole social interest angle and everything. You’re kicked out, alone, with only your tiger to rely on. ‘In an uncaring world, Wiley Farrel has only one place left to go where he won’t be judged: the arms of his lover.’”

“Seriously?”

“What, you’ve never read those social-interest pieces? Come on, we could work something in about how he’s the only one who doesn’t judge you. ‘Their love has earned scorn and cost him a job.’ This thing practically writes itself.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for this yet.”

“You know, some of those talk shows, they pay you to come on. Can be a nice little bonus while you’re waitin’ for the phone to ring.”

“I’ll be okay. I’ve got some savings.” I shift the phone, stare out the window. “I can take care of myself. I’m not a complete incompetent.”

He catches my tone. “Hey, listen. This ain’t about you, y’know? The Dragons suck, they were probably gonna fire all of you after the season anyway. They needed to do something.”

“They didn’t need to do it. They got a phone call.”

“Yeah, that was an asshole move, whoever it was.” He goes on talking, but I tune out for a second. It was an asshole move. As good as I want to be, as much as it means to Dev, I know myself. I’m about five minutes from telling Kinnel who it was who made the call. And that’ll just escalate things. Mikhail will hit back, and I’ll hit back, and Dev will keep being miserable. Eventually, I’ll lose him. Not while he’s still feeling sorry for me, maybe not this year. But that’s the road we’ll be on.

No, telling Kinnel isn’t the right thing to do. But neither, I realize, is nothing. Because I’m not at all sure that we’re not on that road already. And I need to be sure we’re not. I can’t wait until Dev’s season is over, after Thanksgiving and Christmas. I can’t wait until I’m flying around the country on interviews. I can’t let

this sit. I started this, back in Lake Handerson. That's where I need to go to fix it.

"Listen, Hal," I say. "Hold off on the story for a week or so."

"Huh? Sure, I ain't got nothin' but notes. Why?"

"I'm gonna try to give you a happy ending."

He taps his desk, a loud clicking that comes through the phone clearly. "Should I fly up there?"

"Not that kind of happy ending. Pervert."

"Can't blame a guy for tryin'." He laughs. "Just don't do nothin' illegal."

"No promises."

"...without callin' me."

"You got connections with the cops?"

"Sometimes the press is stronger'n you'd think. Go do what you gotta do. And don't talk to no other reporters."

I run back to the loft and throw some stuff into an overnight bag, by the red light of approaching sunset. It takes about half an hour to pack. In all that time, I don't manage to talk myself out of the idea I had. I turn it around, I tell myself I made a resolution not to be pushy, I tell myself it's not going to help. But I can't just sit here and do nothing.

I take one of the dresses out of my closet, fold it, and hold it, staring at the bag. It wouldn't hurt to be prepared, right? No. I take a breath and hang the dress back up, and close the closet door. What I'm gonna do, I'm gonna do as me. No disguises.

That'll be hard, but not as hard as calling Dev. I can't not tell him. So I do it from the road, to make it harder for me to be talked out of it.

Which, predictably, is the first thing he tries to do. I swallow the last of my fast-food chicken sandwich as I merge onto the highway. The headset's clipped to the outside of my ear, the phone mounted on the dash. A light snow is falling, but it's nothing serious. "Turn the car around," he says.

"Trust me," I say.

“What exactly is this going to accomplish? Why don’t you just call him? I’ll give you the number.”

“I have the number. He called me, remember?”

“Fuck. Don’t remind me.”

“Listen.” The rehearsed words come easily. “This isn’t working at all. I can’t get through over the phone. I need to do something to help fix it.”

“And going up to surprise my parents is helping how?”

He still sounds testy, of course. “I’m going to call and warn them. Your mom, anyway. But I know I can do this,” I say, overriding his interruption. “I know your father better than I did when we visited. I know what he wants to hear and what he doesn’t want to hear. I know my limits.”

“Oh, do you? Listen, doc, please, turn the damn car around.”

“No. Look, you can’t do anything ’til the season’s over, right? And God knows what’s going to happen in the next two months. Your dad—”

“My dad might actually kill you this time.”

“Your dad needs to have a showdown. Maybe he needs to beat me up.”

“That’s not funny.”

I flex my left paw. “If it takes a broken arm—”

“Or jaw.”

“—or jaw to get them to take you back, then so be it. I’ll drink my turkey through a straw.” I whistle ‘Turkey in the Straw,’ but he doesn’t get it.

“Doc, wait ’til Monday.”

“I can’t. My health insurance lapses at the end of the month.”

“I’ll fly up there, and I’ll go with you, and that way he won’t—”

“If you come up, there’ll be this whole family dynamic and they’ll be repressed and you’ll be repressed. I’m just going up on my own and I’ll talk to him, tiger to fox. *Ma-e* to *ma-e*.”

“What’s a *ma-e*?”

I explain Kinnel’s word. He’s unimpressed. “The last time you

tried to talk another language, he broke your paw. Don't go up there with fuckin' Navajo or he'll rip your balls off."

"I won't let him do that. You're the only tiger gets to touch my balls."

"And I wanna keep it that way. So just turn around."

I'm doing seventy-five down the highway, curiously relaxed. "Dev. Do you trust me?"

"You don't know what you're getting into." He's urgent, desperate, knowing this is the end of the argument. "The best thing that can happen to you up there is he won't see you."

"Answer me: do you trust me?"

He waits a long time. It's kind of an unfair trump card to play, but I need it now. "I trust you," he says.

"Okay. If things start going bad, I'll bail. I promise you."

Even over the road noise, I hear him breathing into the phone. "You don't always—"

I've got him now, I know. "I'll call you right after every conversation. I'll leave voice mails if your phone is off."

I count five harsh breaths before he growls softly. "Be careful."

"I can take care of myself. I started practicing my aikido again."

"Oh, good, impress the die-hard domestic car lover with some fancy Japanese fighting style. Do you know broken-arm-fu?"

"I'll rent 'Enter the Dragon' tonight. How's practice going?"

It takes him a second to change gears. "Hell, we're all stoked. It's great."

"You getting better with Gerrard?"

He hrfs. "Yeah. Hey, you'll never guess who showed up in New Kestle."

"New Kestle? You mean, Monday?"

"Sunday, actually. I forgot about it after you got fired." He tells me about his fox groupie. "I didn't do anything with him. I coulda, though. Seems like everyone else was."

"Probably not everyone. But it's all part of that gotta-be-more-masculine culture there. The more females you got, the more

impressive you are. Makes it even more special that they're accepting you. Especially since you're not biting at any of those groupies' hooks. Which I appreciate, by the way."

"I dunno, I just don't want, y'know, just sex. I got my paw for that."

I laugh. "I love you. Don't ever change."

"What? I just mean..."

"I know. I feel the same way. And y'know, if you'd done anything with that fox...I don't want you to, but I would've forgiven you. Unless you were going to run off and leave me."

"That's real understanding of you."

"I mean it. We're apart. It's hard. You can get tired of your paw, you got guys and girls throwing themselves at you. You could have a moment of weakness."

"I can?"

I cough. "I mean, no, you can't. Absolutely not. You have to be strong. And I'll be strong. We'll be strong together."

"I'm stronger than you are."

"Didn't we already do this challenge? I'm not going to abstain again."

"Funny. All right. Take care, fox."

"Night, tiger."

"Oh, one more thing." I wait for it. "Turn the car around. Right now."

"I'll call you from that Motel 7 just outside of town."

He sighs, and hangs up.

THE MOTEL IS clean and functional. I call Dev in the morning before I head into town. He tries again to talk me out of it, but without much conviction. He knows me as well as I know him. Ironically, the phone call just strengthens my resolve. He asked me to wait, not to change my plan. So he does trust me, he's

committed to me. He knows I'm doing what I think is right, knows I wouldn't do it unless I needed to, unless I really believed in it with all my heart. I heard that loud and clear, even if he didn't say it out loud.

I park the car a block down from the auto shop. There's a little café where I stop for a latte and a breakfast sandwich, getting my nerve up. This could go so many different ways, but I'm still convinced I'm doing the right thing. I'm just not particularly looking forward to it.

My insurance card is in my wallet. I pick up the phone and dial Dev's parents.

Duscha picks up. "Hi. It's Lee," I say, and then go on before she has a chance to respond. "Just listen to me, please. I really need to make something work with you guys and Dev. I'm here in Lake Handerson, and I want to talk to Mikhail face to face." She's quiet. "Hello?"

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"I know. Hear me out." I tell her what I plan to say.

There's silence at the end of that. "Duscha? Do you think that would help?"

She sighs. "I don't know. I think...I think he will appreciate that you came to talk to him. But..."

"But he still won't take me seriously."

Her voice gets a little higher. "Please don't start a fight."

"I don't mean to start a fight. I just want him to hear me out. I'll say my bit and then I'll...I'll let him say his bit and then I'll go."

"If that's all you're going to do."

"I promise." After we hang up, I stare out at the street. There are a lot of tigers up here. Bears, too, brown and polar. I see one fox, which eases the feeling of isolation somewhat. I know it's not like I could yell out the window if I needed help and the fox would come running. It's a documented phenomenon, though. Foxes like other foxes. Tigers like other tigers.

I take a breath. Sometimes foxes like tigers and tigers like foxes.

I can't shake the feeling that if I were a tiger, this would all be easier. Mikhail wouldn't hate me on first sight. That feeling of camaraderie would at least make it easier for me to walk into the auto shop and convince him to take his son back.

There's an inch of snow on the ground, but the paws of the people walking by have compressed it down into slush. It lingers in drifts in the corners of buildings, speckling the mortar between bricks with white. The sky overhead is still grey; I wouldn't be surprised if we were in for more snow before the end of the day.

It's cold between my toes. Wind ruffles my fur, sneaking through it to poke chill fingers at me. The real cold is in my gut as the auto shop gets closer with each step. It's a big building, with a garage on the ground floor big enough to take three cars side by side. Only one is in there now, a station wagon up on the jacks, but the whole area's open to the street.

There's a tiger working on the wagon, and a bear bent over the tool bench to the right. Loud rattling sounds fill the air periodically, the smells of oil and gasoline strong even just outside. The new rubber smell of the stack of tires at the back makes its way forward too. I don't see Mikhail anywhere.

I stand at the garage entrance for a good three minutes, fluffed tail curled down against my leg, before the bear notices me. "Hey, Ivan," he rumbles.

The tiger pulls his head down from the car, sees the bear pointing to me. He wipes his paws on a rag and walks toward me. "Morning," he says. "What can I do for ya?"

My heart thumps. "Is Mikhail in?"

Ivan squints. He jerks a thumb upwards. "He's in the office. What's this about?"

"Personal," I say.

The big tiger leans closer. He's about as big as Dev, just not as muscular. His fur is stained with grease, his overalls filthy, and he's showing a gut. His muzzle is clean, though, white and black with a touch of grey near the eyes. I see his nostrils flare. "You smell

familiar," he rumbles.

"Yeah," I say, seeing no reason to lie. "We ran into each other over at Mikhail's house a little while back." I hold up the paw wrapped in the bandage, the metal splint glinting.

He frowns. The bear turns toward me, scratching his ears. "Sorry," Ivan says, "Ain't got many foxes hereabouts. I don't remember..."

Then he does. His eyes widen. He takes a step back and surveys me, holding a paw out. "You stay there. I'll...I'll let Mickey know you're here."

The bear's frown doesn't clear. "Ivan?" he says slowly.

Ivan steps quickly to the bear's side and bends his muzzle down. "It's that fox," he says into the small ear in what I hope he thinks is a discreet whisper.

The bear stares at me. "Huh," he says. He's got a gut too, but it doesn't look as bad on him as it does on Ivan, who's moving surprisingly quickly up the stairs, his steps thudding on the cheap wooden planks.

Cars speed by outside, covering any sound I might be able to hear from upstairs. The bear and I watch each other. I fold my arms, to appear more nonchalant, and also because my fingers keep tapping things. He doesn't even pretend to be doing anything with his tool bench.

The wind picks up. I tighten my arms around myself, but I don't want to step any closer into the garage. The bear and I look at each other, and we wait.

23

Sidelined (Dev)

When Lee hangs up, when I go back out, I try to lose myself in the practice. I try real hard. But I can't get his voice out of my head, can't stop thinking about my father making that phone call that got Lee fired. I hit pretty hard that afternoon, to the point that Gerrard takes me aside and tells me to ease up. I snarl back that I'm just playing hard. He says if I injure someone on the practice team, that doesn't help us win, and I say that if they can't take it, they shouldn't be on the team.

We used to play football, Dad and me and Gregory. I used to tackle Dad with all my strength, but he could always push me away, or drag me along until my brother leapt in to help. When I was in high school, he took particular pride in beating my tackles, although then I could stop him on my own. "Get better," he'd say. "You can't stop me, how are you going to stop kids on the field, hunh?"

I dodge Jake on the next play, trying to get to Baki, the cheetah with the ball. Jake grabs my uniform—holding—but I don't care. I yank at it and charge. The cheetah's gotten rid of the ball, but I tackle him anyway.

"Unnecessary roughness," he says, once I let him up.

"Holding." I wave at Jake.

We stare at each other. Jake and Gerrard come up. Baki grins at me, the light still burning in his eyes. "All right," he says. "That's

how we're playin' now."

Gerrard starts to say something and then stops. He looks around, at me, at all of us, and then gives his permission with a curt nod. It's great. Everybody's going full-out, even though we're not wearing pads. I have my brace on, but that doesn't stop my ribs creaking in complaint on a couple tackles. I keep going. It's Baki who stops things, coming up limping on one play.

"That's enough," Gerrard calls.

"It's just twisted," Baki says. He's already putting weight on it.

"Let's run it off," Gerrard says. We do sprints and jog around the field to cool down, then head to the showers.

I feel a lot better; still angry, but calmer. I ask if we can grab a burger, but even the burger places here serve tacos, and the whole place smells like peppers. Glad we're leaving tomorrow.

The guys talk about the weekend's game, about Hellentown and the Pilots' offense. I say "Yeah," or "That's what I hear," and not just because we haven't watched a lot of film on them yet this year. My mind's elsewhere. The guys pretty much let me be, after Gerrard heads off their questions.

As soon as dinner's over, we head back to the hotel. Most of the guys are going to turn in early, but Charm, of course, is not. So I have the room to myself, to dial my father.

The phone rings and rings. Nobody picks up. So I talk to the machine.

"Hey. It's Devlin. Listen, you might not want to talk to me. That's fine. But stay the fuck out of Lee's business. That was a shitty thing you did, a weak thing. This doesn't concern him. This is between me and you. Okay?"

The line clicks. I hold my breath for a second, my bravado wavering. My father's voice says, "He made it about him—"

I hang up. I don't want to hear what he has to say. I don't trust myself to respond. The phone sits in my paw, alive with tiny vibrations. I can hear the echo of the ring in the future, Dad calling me back, furious that I hung up on him.

But the phone doesn't ring. "Good," I mutter, and drop it on the dresser.

I'm just going to have to keep them apart. Lee can't do anything to retaliate, and he's going to want to, once he recovers from the shock. That's who he is, no matter how many promises he makes to me about not being pushy any more. But he doesn't really know my dad. Someone could get seriously hurt, and my money'd be on the small fox going to the hospital again.

Of course, my Dad could find things seriously fucked up too, if Lee really put his mind to it. I don't think he would, because he cares about me. I'm not sure Dad has that restraint. That is, I don't think he thinks about what hurting Lee means to me. If he did, he wouldn't have fucked with Lee's job. Lee shouldn't have talked to Kinnel, no question, but Dad's retaliation was way out of line.

I find my claws snagging the fabric of the chair as I think about it, and lift my paws away. It's not a big deal for me to pay for a damaged chair, but it's just rude. Especially when the hotel has a sign specifically asking clawed guests to be careful. I retract my claws with an effort and go lie down on the bed.

Charm comes in an hour later. "Hey, Gramps," he says. "Thought you'd be sacked out."

"Yeah, well." I stare at the ceiling. "Hey, Charm? Do your folks know about your life? I mean, all the fucking around?"

"Ha." He strips his shirt off. "Dad keeps count for me. 'Just don't get 'em preggers,' he says. Gave me my first box of condoms, did I tell ya?"

"No." I sigh. My dad would probably love it if I had a series of girlfriends. That just doesn't appeal to me at all, not any more. "What if your dad did something really shitty to a friend of yours? Like, got him fired."

He frowns. "Why would Dad want you to get cut?"

"Not me. Just like...one of your girls. I dunno." I press a paw to my head.

He sits on his bed. "Did my dad call you?"

“No. It was my dad. He got Lee fired.”

His little ears twitch, and he blows a long breath out through his nostrils. “Fuck. Uh, I know it’s your dad, but that’s kind of a dick move.”

I pound the bed with a fist. “I know!”

“Okay, cool.” He gets up and stretches. “Long as you know.”

“What do I do?”

“Uh…” He turns to look at me. “Tell him he’s a dick? I could tell my old man that, but I dunno. Hey, wasn’t your dad not talking to you or something?”

“Yeah. They kicked me out because I wouldn’t break up with Lee.”

“And then they got Mrs. Gramps fired?”

“Well. Lee kind of told the papers about me being kicked out.”

Charm blows a snort again. “This sounds like one of them foreign movies with subtitles where I never know what’s going on and then some wolf in a stupid hat stabs a badger in an overcoat.”

“When did you ever go see a foreign movie?”

He waves a hand. “There was this hot jaguar, she was all into that shit.”

“Say no more.” I prop myself up on my elbows.

“Look, Gramps.” Charm yawns. “Sounds like they made the decision for ya. Stick with Mrs. Gramps. You guys are happy. The grups’ll come round or they won’t, but it ain’t your problem now. Leave ’em alone and they’ll leave you alone.”

“Grups?”

He eyes me. “You ain’t never called ’em that? Grownups, I mean.”

I laugh. “I’m a grup, then.”

“Well, yeah,” he says. “But I got a few more years t’go.”

He lies down on the bed and whacks the light switch. “Asshole,” I say, and I flick off my light too.

I’m still mad in the morning. Like, I think about it and I get pissed all over again. I’ve been upset at my dad before—I think I

spent most of my junior year of high school fighting with him—but not like this. It's like he's become a different person. And now I'm looking at some of the other things he's said, the way he treated some friends of ours when he felt they'd let him down, the way he talked to our relatives, even the way he treats Mom sometimes. Is he, really, all that different now?

I'm mad at myself, too, for all the times I was intimidated by him. If I'd stood up to him at home or at the restaurant...if I'd laid down the law and said, "this is how it's going to be," then would he have messed with Lee that way? If there were nothing for Lee to tell that reporter about, then Dad wouldn't have made that phone call. Or would he?

Above and beyond that, I can't stop thinking that this happy home family life I've been clinging to has been nothing but a lie. I know Lee would tell me I'm overreacting. I know Dad would say he's only done this because he cares about me, the same as Lee did. But I can see Lee's reasoning. I know that partly he was trying to get back at Dad, but he was also trying to show how he was wrong, force him to take me back in. Dad wasn't doing anything but being petty and vengeful and, as Charm so bluntly put it, a dick.

I dial up appropriately angry music on my iPod for the flight. Something with loud guitar and people wailing about how much the world sucks fits my mood. The rest of the team doesn't, though. They're all laughing and joking, high-fiving, talking about how much ass we're going to kick—and get—in Hellentown. The New Kestle pickings are pretty slim, I guess, but Hellentown is prime territory. Gerrard reminds them not to get distracted Saturday night, and Charm laughs and tells the plane to tag along with him any other night.

When that dies down, Charm asks, as discreetly as he can (only the nearest three rows hear him), if Lee's coming to visit. I say I don't know. The question reminds me how much I miss him, though, how much I'd love to have him near me just to vent about all this. To apologize for my dad, to put my arms around him and

be reassured that he's still there.

We land, pile into a bus, and go straight to practice while our bags go to our hotel. To my surprise, Carson taps my shoulder as we're heading into the locker room. I step aside with him and let the other guys go in.

His expression is, as always, unreadable. He's got his sleeveless tee on, so I can see the muscles bunched under the spotted fur of his folded arms. "What's up?"

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod. "Sure. I'm good with football. Just this family thing is a pain in the ass."

He stares past my shoulder. "Gerrard said."

I'm not sure what to say to that. "Thanks," I say finally.

"My dad's an asshole," he says.

I tilt my head. He's still not looking right at me. "I'm sorry," I say.

He turns his head so I can see the side of his throat. His fingers brush the golden fur there. "See this?"

"You mean the spots?"

"No. The scar."

I look closer, and I see it. His fingers are just brushing a thin line of white fur. I wouldn't be able to see it if it didn't bisect a black spot. "Oh. Yeah?"

His fingers smooth the fur down, hiding the scar again. "My dad did that. When I was two. Threw me through a window. Mom took me to the emergency room."

"Christ."

"He took off 'til I was twelve. Then he came back and broke my arm trying to get money from me." He says it as if he's reading it off a team's injury report in the newspaper, with no spark of anger in his eyes. "Mom threw him out. Said she'd kill him if he came back."

"You ever see him again?"

He shrugs. "He's in prison."

“Oh.” I don’t quite know what else I can say. “My dad’s not…uh, he’s just a dick. He’s not…”

“A psychopathic asshole loser?”

“Um.”

Carson claps me on the shoulder. “Just wanted to say. There’s worse things. I turned out okay. You did too. C’mon.”

I follow him into the locker room in sort of a daze. Are all families fucked up and I just never noticed? I mean, my dad knocked the wind out of me a bunch of times, tackled me pretty rough, but never sent me to the hospital. Maybe he’s an asshole, but he did always look out for his family.

By this point, I’m getting good at shoving personal issues aside to play football. This Hellentown game is critical to us, and I know it. Nothing I do or say this afternoon is going to affect what my father thinks, anyway. I might as well do my drills, show the coaches that my ribs are all better, or at least up to scratch to play. They still hurt, but not enough to stop me doing what I need to.

We have a good practice, a really good one. Wednesday, too. I talk to Lee both nights, but each time, I hear the mirror of myself after my father walked out on me. I keep asking him to come down and visit, because I feel so powerless across the phone line. He keeps saying no, that he’s doing stuff with Morty about looking for a job. And because it’s Lee, I’m worried that he’ll do something dangerous just out of boredom.

On Thursday, all my fears come true when he calls me from the road. As I listen, I stand up and start pacing the room. I’m waving my arms even though he can’t see me. I have to say, it’s good to hear him talking with determination rather than depression, but I wish he’d picked something, anything else to be determined about. The thought of him standing up to my dad in person makes me uneasy enough. Him doing it without me there to drive him to the hospital afterward freaks me out. I plead, I beg, I order, until he pulls out the unfair question of whether I trust him.

I can’t say no, not after our last fight. That’s got nothing to do

with the fact that I don't know what my father will do to him. I believe that breaking his paw wasn't intentional. Not that first time. I don't know whether it will be the next time.

I call my parents, but they don't pick up, and I can't think of what to say in a voice mail. But I don't sleep well that night. The memory of Lee's eyes, dopey on pain meds, swims in my head. I smell the bitter antiseptic of the hospital. I hear my father's cold voice. When it's finally time to get up, I feel like I haven't slept.

On the way in to practice Friday morning, I call my dad's work number. He doesn't answer. I remember that we're an hour ahead of him, and I curse loud enough that Charm asks me if I'm talking to my agent. How do I tell my teammates that I'm stressing out because my boyfriend is going to visit my possibly prone-to-violence father?

The answer: I don't. I wait until an hour into practice. We finish one set of drills and I ask Steez if I can run out for five minutes. He looks skeptical, but I tell him I need to make a quick call to get my head back in the game. He narrows his eyes and nods, tail lashing. "Go, go."

"I'll be fast," I promise.

It's a good thing I promised that, because if I had time to think, I probably would. I'm not thinking about myself as I hit the numbers. I'm seeing Lee's muzzle again, hearing the defiance in his voice from last night. I press the phone to my ear and try to calm my breathing.

"Lakeside Auto."

"Dad, listen, it's me. I need to tell you—"

His voice cuts across mine. "I have nothing to say to you on the phone."

"Lee's coming up there to see you."

I rush out the words, afraid he'll hang up. For a moment, I think maybe he did. "Dad?"

"You sent him in your place?"

"What?" I stare out of the locker room at the field. "I didn't

send him there."

"You didn't stop him. Isn't he supposed to be yours?" His voice carries a bit of a sneer.

"He's not—it doesn't work that way. He's coming up because of that phone call you made to the Dragons."

"Heh." The half-laugh sounds sinister. "So he wants a fight. I will put him in his place and send him on his way."

"Lion Christ, Dad!"

"Or should I say on *her* way? Is that how he likes you to talk?"

I can't believe this conversation. It's like I'm in some kind of fucked-up fantasy world. "Just don't talk to him!"

"You're not the son I thought you were. Didn't I teach you to face your issues yourself?"

"I tried—"

"This is why you're weak. If you could stand up for yourself, you wouldn't be in this so-called relationship."

"I—I *choose* to be in this relationship, and if you can't understand that, then we don't have anything to talk about."

I hear him talking to someone else in the room. "What?" He returns to the phone. "Well, your fox is here."

"Don't touch him!" I yell.

"Good-bye." He hangs up.

24

Defensive Line (Lee)

Both tigers clomp down the stairs, their paces measured, growing louder as they descend. I watch the doorway, tail flicking, ears straining for any clues to their mood. Neither of them says anything on the way down. Ivan comes out first, giving me a look as if to make sure I haven't stolen anything. He steps to one side, letting Mikhail out into the garage.

He's as big as I remember. Almost as tall as Dev, broad-shouldered, tail lashing behind him. He wears a denim shirt with his name in an oval patch on it, denim pants, and a half-smirk that widens as he looks down at me. Upstairs, a phone rings. He flicks an ear to it, but doesn't look away from me.

I straighten. He stands in the doorway. We measure each other, and then he crooks a finger, points beyond the car that's up on the lift. I nod, and follow him around to that side of the garage. I try not to shiver, though my fur is prickling.

On the other side of the car, the space in the garage is smaller, boxes of tires confining us to a space where we could both walk abreast for eight or nine paces. We stand about three apart. I can't smell his attitude over the thick rubber of the tires, the oil and grease of the garage. He folds his arms; I do the same. Then I remember that I'm trying to be conciliatory and I lower my arms to my sides, hooking thumbs into my pockets.

His eyes flick down to my bandaged paw. They remain

impassive. He doesn't throw me out of the garage, so I jump right into it. "I came up here to apologize," I say.

He raises an eyebrow, focused back on me. Here goes: my big idea for making things right. Faced with the reality of Mikhail, my words catch in my throat, inadequate and embarrassing. I push them out anyway. "For saying things about Dev—about your son. Listen, he's a real..." This is going to be hard enough to say without me throwing foreign words into it. "He's strong, he's all male."

I don't know what I expect from him, but it isn't, "If he were strong, he would be here."

"He has a game to prepare for. He didn't want me to come here, either. But—"

"I know." His lips stretch into a grin. "He told me you are disobedient. Tell me, why did you come here?"

"To tell you, um..." The grin is throwing me off. Also the 'disobedient.' I stick to my prepared speech. "That. That you were right. I'm the weak one. So you can still think of him like you always have."

He paces around me. Behind the car, up on the jacks, Ivan's long tail distracts me for a moment. He and the bear are standing, otherwise motionless. Then Mikhail speaks again. "It's Devlin who is weak. He has let you pull him away from his family."

"Away...?" I try to control my own tail's angry curl. "Look, I'm the one trying to get you all back together."

"With yourself in the middle of it."

"Because," I say, folding my arms, "I just want Dev to be happy."

"Happy. And yet, and yet," he leans closer as he says this, half-laughing, "you will not do the one thing that would make him happy."

My idea about what he wanted to hear is crumbling. I feel like I'm hurling myself against a big black-striped brick wall. "That is what I'm trying to do. Right now."

He waves a paw. "You are trying to keep his fame for yourself.

Or his money, perhaps. You foxes always want something."

"I don't need his money."

"Ha. Pull the other one." He shakes his head.

"Look," I say, because he's doing that half-chuckle again, "I'd appreciate it if you would take this seriously. I don't know what's funny about it."

"It is all funny!" He makes a big, sweeping gesture. "You, you come here to plead for him, as though he cannot plead for himself. You think because you tell me you let him," he lowers his voice, "*fuck you*," and it's back up again, "that I will say, come home, Devlin, all is forgiven? That it will be just like it used to be?" His muzzle wrinkles in a sneer. "I know what you let him do to you, that you are just trying to make me angry when you say it is not so."

"You didn't *know* it until I told you," I say, my ears flattening. Just like that, my big idea is swept away.

He laughs. "I may not know what you are trying to turn him into, but I know certain things about my son. Go, little fox." He stands aside and gestures to the open mouth of the garage, where a female wolverine and bear are standing, peering in curiously. "Go back to Hilltown, and if you really want Devlin to be happy, you will not see him, or any of his family, ever again."

I set my teeth. "That reminds me. I haven't thanked you for getting me fired."

His smile dies. I think I see a flicker of uncertainty, and then smug satisfaction masks it. "You had not told the Dragons, I understand. Good."

"It's because of me that they drafted Dev!"

Mikhail's smile wavers at that, too. Then I hear Ivan murmuring behind the car. Mikhail looks in that direction, then out at the people in front. "That is not true," he says, loudly.

"And you say you know your son." I put some scorn into it.

"He earned his spot."

"Yes!" I jump on that. "Because I got him the chance." I bite

back the rest of what I want to say, that I was the one he was striving to impress because you never showed him any approval, that I motivated him in a way you never could.

He takes a step toward me, blocking more light from the front of the garage. Frantically, I run through my aikido defenses in my head. They feel flimsy against the reality of six feet of muscled tiger staring me down from two feet away. Hold and twist, spin and throw. My heart accelerates.

But Mikhail doesn't come closer. "Then why," he says, "did he never tell me any of this?"

"Because you won't let him!" The words are out before I can think of something less confrontational. "You put up this—"

He doesn't let me finish, yelling over me, "Why could he not tell me about this life in person, himself? Why did I have to learn about it on *television?*"

"It's your bigotry that makes him have to hide." I point with my right hand, part of me alert for any attempt he might make to grab it. I can't afford to lose both paws.

"He was not like that before he met you. I know how you are. Secrets. Hiding. Deception. No wonder he is ashamed."

"He's not ashamed. You're the one who should be ashamed, the way you treated him."

He leans closer. One foot away. "You dare talk to me like this, in my own business? Get out."

"I'm not leaving," I say, despite my body's efforts to make me obey him, "until you agree to take him back."

"I have told him when he can come back. He does not—"

"I don't have to come along." He glares at my interruption, but I keep going. "Just let him come back for the holidays. I'll stay home."

He snorts. "And you get your way."

"It's called a compromise."

"Yes." He sneers, showing his impressive fangs. "Compromise is female word for getting what you want later rather than sooner."

I try to ignore the gender dig. “I’m being honest.”

He sees the tension in my shoulders and arms, and maybe mistakes it. “You should not restrain yourself,” he says. “You want to hit me, don’t you?”

I will my paws to open, to stay flat at my sides. “No.”

“Of course not. Come all this way just to talk. You…foxes are all talk.” He jabs a paw in my direction, coming within inches of my muzzle. I only flinch a little, jerking back into the car. “When you leave him, Devlin will talk to me himself, the way he used to.”

“He doesn’t talk to you because you don’t *listen* to him.” I snap the words. “You hear what you want to hear, you tell him he can talk to you and then make homophobic remarks and denigrate his accomplishments. What’s he supposed to say?”

His eyes widen, then narrow. He growls. “I never stopped him from talking. I never—”

I talk over him. “If you really loved him, you’d take him back. With or without me, and you’d work out the details later. I tell you, he loves you. God knows why. You bully him all his life, you doubt his football career, you only support him after he succeeds, and when he finds something that really does make him happy, you try to ruin it for him.”

My heart’s racing. Mikhail is breathing hard, his anger filling the air even over the strong rubber scent of the tires, now. I can hear a larger crowd at the entrance to the garage, can see them out of the corner of my eye, but Mikhail does not look at them. He reminds me, in an image I wish I could dismiss, of Dev during our last fight: furious, betrayed, confused. But not understanding what I’m saying. To my horror, I find that I really do want to hit him. My paws are clenched into fists again. I uncurl them.

“That,” he says finally, “Is. Enough.” He points to the entrance. “Leave. Now.”

I shake my head. “We’re having this out.”

He opens his mouth to say something, closes it again. “There is nothing to have out. We are finished. Leave, or I will call the

police."

I stare back at him. "You really want them to come remove your son's boyfriend from your garage?"

His eyes flick around to the crowd, then. He shrugs. "Then stay." He laughs, with a horrible, forced sound. "*Boy*-friend. Hah."

His paw pushes at my chest. I only manage to evade part of it, staggering back into the car. He turns and walks toward the front of the garage.

Anger flares; I push it back. "Hey! We're not finished." I take a step and grab at the denim shirt.

As soon as he feels my fingers, he whirls and pushes me again, harder. Again, I only manage to partially avoid it. I stagger back into the tires, stumbling to the back of the garage. My injured paw smacks into a box, sending pain shooting through my arm. "Okay," he says, the grin back. "You want to fight? Let's fight."

Ivan and the bear are watching me from the back wall. I'm trapped here in the corner against shelves full of parts and tools. "I don't—"

He pulls back a fist and jabs at me, almost playing. I dodge. "Coward. Come on. Show me you have balls."

"We both love your son!" I yell.

His massive bulk looms over me. I wish I could smell the oil or grease now; all I can smell is tiger, and it smells enough like Dev to confuse the hell out of me. "Making him turn his back on his family, making him ashamed, you think that is love?"

There's no room on either side of him for me to get past. Desperate, I scrounge for words. "You tell me," I say. "Seems to mean it to you."

He's so close, I can't stop him from grabbing my shoulder. I feel his claws punch through my shirt, brush my skin through my fur. He tries to hold me with his left paw while he draws back his right. I twist away and push him backwards, not hard, but enough that he staggers into the car behind him. He recovers, shaking his head. Behind him, the spectators look at each other, but none comes

forward.

"See," he says, and he's smiling a dangerous this-is-going-to-be-fun smile. "You can fight."

There's no way out but past him. Now he doesn't want me to leave, and he can stand here and grab at me all day until he gets me where he wants me. But if he throws a punch, if I could throw him to one side, I could get around behind him, be in a better position. "The problem is," I say, "that you love your idea of him more than you love him. Did you ever really love him?"

"Love," he snorts. "You know nothing of a father's love."

I brace myself on the shelves to my right with my uninjured paw. My eyes narrow, while I curl my tail under me in preparation. "Neither do you."

His lips twist, wrinkling his muzzle with a low, deadly growl. He winds up again, not playing this time. The balled fist rockets toward me. I have a split-second.

I sidestep, grab his fist, and lower my shoulder. I can't get completely out of the way, but I only get pushed back into boxes as he goes tumbling past me.

I hear a thud, a clank. Mikhail drops to the floor. I catch myself with my uninjured paw, staggering back to my feet quickly, watching him.

He stays on the floor, shoulder and head leaning against a shelf of tools and parts, the rest of him sprawled awkwardly around grease and oil stains. He doesn't get up.

"Mickey!" Ivan leans in to try to see better. "Mickey?"

The way to the crowd of spectators is clear. But if Mikhail's really hurt, I can't run out. I take a step toward him. I'm panting hard. He could be just faking to get me closer.

Ivan stares at me and then jumps forward, kneeling at Mikhail's side. "Mickey, you okay—sweet Lion Jesus!"

I don't have to ask. When he gets up, the smell of blood hits me before I see the red smear on his paw. "Danny," he yells. "Call an ambulance."

“Shit.” I take a step forward as the bear scrambles for the phone. “You guys have any clean cloths?”

“You keep away from him.” Ivan’s not nearly as imposing as Mikhail, but he tries.

“Oh, come on.” I scan the area I’m in for anything clean. Nothing. I grab my shirt where Mikhail’s claws ripped it. “I’m dating his son. I don’t want anything bad to happen to him. I didn’t want *that* to happen to him.”

My heart’s still pounding. I can’t smell anything but blood as I rip my shirt at the sleeve. “Here.” I push past Ivan and kneel next to Mikhail. He really is barely conscious. I don’t think he’s completely out, but the bloody gash behind his ear looks frightening. I press the cloth to it and hold it there, looking up to see what he hit his head on.

“Let me do that.” Ivan tries to squeeze in next to me.

There: a toolbox has a corner sticking out about a foot over my head. “It’s okay, I got it,” I say. When he doesn’t move back, I say, “He’s not going to catch gay from me. I’m helping. I know how to do this.”

His ears flatten. He takes a step back.

In my paws, Mikhail’s head moves. His eyes focus on me, briefly. “Fox,” he gasps out.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, softly. The flicker of a frown crosses his expression, then he loses focus again.

Someone from the entrance calls, “Is he okay?”

Ivan turns and holds his paws up. “He’s okay. Just hit his head. Ambulance is comin’.”

Under my fingers, Mikhail rumbles, making vague movements. He clutches at my bare arm with a paw, claws extending and retracting. “Help’s on the way,” I say. “You’re gonna be fine.” And then, as my panting subsides, “I’m sorry.”

He focuses on me again, staring. I don’t know if he heard me.

Ivan turns back, crouching behind me. “You sure he’s okay?” His tone’s softer. I wonder if *he* heard.

I nod. “Just keeping pressure on it. He might have a concussion, but as long as we don’t let him go to sleep...even then, he’ll be fine ’til the ambulance gets here.”

The other tiger and I watch Mikhail. Ivan puts a paw on Mikhail’s other arm. “You hear, Mickey? You’re gonna be okay.”

Sirens wail, distant. “Just a couple more minutes,” I say.

Ivan says, “Hey, uh.”

I turn to look at him. His ears are down. “That night you was here. Mickey was actin’ weird all day. Wasn’t himself.” His eyes go to my splint. “He ain’t violent like that. Mostly.”

I snort and look back at the wound, at my black fingers pressing on the white shirt sleeve, the smears of red through it. It doesn’t feel bad, but I don’t dare press hard enough to sense a fracture. My tail’s still tightly pressed below my thigh, and I can’t seem to bring my ears up past half-height. They keep wanting to flatten down.

Ivan clears his throat. “Look, we got a couple, they bring their cars in. Bears, Mack Bremly and Ollie Denton. You, uh, you know ’em?”

I frown. Then it becomes clear what he means. “No,” I say, gently. “I haven’t looked up the local gay directory here.”

He’s not sure if I’m joking. “Oh. They’re pretty nice, y’know. I mean, we got nothin’ against ’em. Just Mickey, he was all worked up ’cause it was his son. Y’know, it’s okay for other guys, but...”

“I know how that works.” I shake my head. “It’s just...if it makes him happy, what’s the problem with it?”

“It ain’t how he thinks of his son.”

I stare down at Dev’s father’s fluttering eyelids. The sirens are loud now. Almost here. “Maybe he needs to change the way he thinks.”

“Mickey ain’t much for that.” Ivan looks down at his boss. “Y’know we only started servicin’ foreign cars like three years ago?”

“Dev told me.”

“After a while wasn’t really much choice. Not if he wanted ta

keep the garage." He kneels, still a foot taller than me. "Stubborn bastard. I tol' him for years, but he di'n wanna take them foreign cars." He looks down, out at the crowd. "So, uh. What d'you drive?"

It takes me a moment to remember. "I got a Civique, actually."

He nods, keeping an eye on Mikhail. "Runs pretty good, don't it? Got a Dayrunner m'self."

I wouldn't have imagined myself sitting here, holding Dev's father's bleeding head, having a conversation about cars with his head mechanic. But there we are, trying to ignore the reality of the situation. Then the ambulance arrives.

Paramedics rush in, a pine marten and a bear. They give me a nod as I release the shirt sleeve bandage and carry him to the ambulance. "Male tiger, mid fifties. Head injury. Vitals look good. Probable concussion," the pine marten says while the bear and a wolverine prepare the rolling bed and lift him onto it. Ivan and I step out of the garage, into the snow, to give them room. The marten bends over Mikhail and asks him his name, what day it is. I don't hear any replies.

That's when I notice the police car behind the ambulance and the uniformed stag leaning against it. When he sees me and Ivan, he walks toward us, taking out a pad. Ivan raises a paw when he sees him. "Hey, Chaz."

"Ivan." The stag has an impossibly deep voice, to go with his broad shoulders. His rack's even more impressive than Paul's. "What happened?"

Ivan looks at me, scratches his head. "Uh, well, Mickey fell... He's gonna be okay, though, Jamie said so." He waves toward the pine marten.

"He awake?"

Ivan shakes his head. "Well, kinda. But he's not really talkin'."

Chaz follows Ivan's look. "What's your name, son?"

Part of the gawking crowd drifts over to stand a respectful distance from us. "Lee—Wiley Farrel." I dig into my pocket for my

driver's license.

Chaz leans forward and takes it from my paw. He smells of coffee and sweat. "From Hilltown."

"Yeah."

"What'cha doin' up here?"

He holds my license, staring down at me. Between him and Ivan, a fox could get a complex about being short. "Came up to visit Mikhail."

"That's Mickey," Ivan says, trying to help.

Chaz taps my driver's license against his fingers. "Did you see him fall?"

Ivan's waiting to see what I'll say. "We kinda got in a fight," I say. What else am I going to do? "He threw a punch and, uh, missed."

Chaz snorts, and hands my license back. "What did you hit him with?"

"Nothing. He fell."

"Uh-huh." Chaz rubs his antlers. "Ivan, you see what happened?"

"Yeah." Ivan shifts, now looking past me at the people a few yards away. He lowers his voice. "Like the kid said. They got in a fight. Mickey tried to hit him, and the kid stepped aside. Mickey hit his head on somethin'. Tool box, I guess."

"Really." Chaz looks at me. "That's assault."

"Oh, look, Chaz," Ivan says. "The kid…he didn't…I mean, he grabbed Mickey's arm, sure, but…"

"I meant for Mickey," Chaz says. His dark brown eyes return to me, narrower. "Did you participate in the fight?"

There's not much I can say. "Yeah. Like he said."

"Huh. Why didn't you say that right off?"

I glance at Ivan and then flick my ears, looking down at the snow and then up at Chaz. "I, uh, I didn't want to embarrass Mikhail. Mickey."

"Right." Chaz rubs his antlers again. "You better come with

me."

"Chaz, go easy on the kid. Mickey's a big guy."

"Thanks, Ivan," I say. "But I'll be okay."

"We're just gonna hold you," Chaz says. "When Mickey wakes up, he can decide if he wants to press charges." Almost as an afterthought, he adds, "And you can, too."

"You don't have to cuff me," I say. "I'll go quietly."

Chaz raises an eyebrow. Then he snorts through his long nose, and I get a hint of a smile. "Don't watch so many cop shows," he says.

I've never been in the back of a police car. It smells pretty bad. The thick pine of the air freshener doesn't really cover up the stench of vomit, the musk and body odor of several different big mustelids. I look out the window and see Ivan looking back. I give him a thumbs-up, and though he doesn't stop looking worried, he does give me a little smile. And it occurs to me then that all of Ivan's car talk was as much for my benefit, to make me feel better, as to distract himself.

Chaz's antlers scrape the roof of the car. He slams his door shut, says something into the radio. I look back as we pull away, following the ambulance. They're not running the siren, which I think is good. Ivan's trying to shoo the crowd away, but as we turn the corner, I see him make gestures, like acting out a fight.

"So how'd you knock him down?" Chaz says.

"Aikido," I say.

"Gesundheit." He laughs at his own joke.

I give him a chuckle. He's being pretty nice. "It's a martial art that focuses on avoidance of conflict."

"Hah." He shakes his head. "Stick with karate."

"Well," I say, "he didn't land a punch."

His eyes flick up to the mirror. "I guess. You bein' small and all."

"Yeah. Lots of foxes, rabbits, weasels take it."

"Uh-huh. What's your beef with Mickey?"

I stare out the window. The small town of Lake Handerson rolls by. The ambulance, ahead of us, peels off to the right. Watching it go down the street, I see the charming white hospital complex it's headed for. I don't think it's the same one Dev took me to, last time, but I can't really tell. I was pretty out of it, coming and going. "Well," I say. "I'm..."

I catch his glance back in the mirror out of my peripheral vision, and turn to meet it. Stories of cops beating up faggots in remote midwestern towns rise to my mind. I'm curiously at ease. "I'm dating his son," I say.

Chaz pauses for a moment, then just says, "Huh."

"He doesn't like that much."

The stag shakes his head slowly. "Don't figure he would."

I can't help asking. "What about you?"

He makes a turn. The police station is down this block. "Ain't my family," he says. "You didn't come here to pick a fight, did you?"

"No, sir."

"Even with that martial arts stuff?"

"No, sir. It's to help me get out of things someone else starts."

He looks back, pulling the car to a stop. "Mickey start somethin'?"

I think back. "Well, he pushed me. But I grabbed his shirt when he turned away. Then he took a swing at me."

"Rip your sleeve off?"

I rub the bare fur of my arm. "Started to. I ripped the rest of it off."

He gets out and opens my door. "That part of your ah-key-doe?"

I step out onto cold pavement and breathe in the clean air. "No. I used it to stop the bleeding from his head."

His smile freezes, then fades. His hand on my shoulder is firm but gentle. "Nice work," he says. "C'mon, let's do your paperwork."

We go into the small, clean police station, where he chats with

the ferret at the desk, whose name is Paulie and who types up all the info efficiently into a computer form as I recount what happened. He takes my driver's license and copies out the info from it while Chaz hands me a scent-swab. "Just hold it under the base of your tail for a count of five," he says. "You can go in the restroom if you want."

I shake my head. "Not unless you need me to." I slip the little swab under my tail where it hangs out over my pants. After five seconds, I drop the swab in the plastic bag Chaz is holding. He sniffs it and then sniffs me, and seals it up. "Roll up your other sleeve, please."

He photographs the red-brown-white demarcation on my arms, and then the pattern of whiskers on my muzzle. By then, the ferret is done. He prints out a form for me to sign and Chaz says, "Okay, now we have to write up another set. Unless you don't want to press charges against Mickey."

"What?" I blink, pen still in my paw. The feeling of being powerless in the grip of due process abates. I sit up straighter, arching my tail. It's nice to feel that the law is working fairly in both directions. "No, of course not."

"Just checking." Chaz's half-smile tells me I gave the right answer. "We don't really have to hold you here overnight. I got your address. Where you stayin'?"

"Motel 7 on the freeway." I point in the direction I think it is.

"I know the one. Need a ride back?"

"My car's at the café." I take a breath. "Thanks. Listen, is there any way to make sure nobody calls Dev until Sunday night?"

He frowns. "Can't stop the family callin' him if they wanna."

I chew my lip. "I'll call to tell him I'm okay, but I don't want him rushing up here. He can't afford to miss this game. Can't even afford to be distracted for it. He needs all his focus."

Chaz scratches at the base of his antlers. "They win this one, they can sniff playoffs, huh?"

I nod. "Thought you'd all be Dragons fans up here."

He points to the Dragons' season schedule on the wall. "Ain't much to cheer about this year, though. Might as well root for a local boy. Tell ya what. I'll call Duscha. If she ain't called him yet, I'll ask her not to."

"Ivan, too."

"Mmm." He looks at me and shakes his head. "Y'sound like my ma." I start to bristle, realize he doesn't mean anything by it, and force a half-grin, perking my ears to listen. "Ah, I usedta play football too. Not good like Miski, but I did okay. My ma was always goin' on at me about focusin' on the game. Never could do it worth a damn. Pretty doe in the bleachers and I'd get hit in the head with the ball." He points to his rack. "Caught it in my antlers once."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"Oh, sure," he says. "Just makes it harder to hold onta when you go down."

A door at the back of the front room bursts open. A large wolverine—large meaning he's about my height and twice as wide—stomps up to the front desk. He's got on the same uniform as Chaz, only more elaborate, and his hat sports a big shiny badge. His glare goes from Chaz to me. "Hartley!" he yells. "This the guy beat up Mickey?"

Chaz's eyes widen. "How did you..."

"Barb was downtown. Stopped to look, gave me a call. Paperwork done?"

"Yes, sir, but..."

"Good. Toss him in the drunk tank for the night. There's only Johnny in there."

"Sir, I really don't reckon..." But the wolverine, whom I presume is the chief, is scanning the incident report, which I've left on the desk. I get a whiff of the strong plug of tobacco he's chewing as he reads it.

"City boys comin' up here terrorizin' our local heroes. Set bail at a grand."

“Bail? Sir, he hasn’t been formally charged, and—”

“What? Why not?”

“Mickey’s still out. He can’t bring charges.”

The wolverine chews his plug of tobacco. “But he was fightin’. So we can detain him ’til Mickey wakes up.”

“Sir, I don’t think he’s a risk—” Chaz is trying hard to keep his calm.

The wolverine’s small, dark eyes stare at me. “He’s a fox. Course he’s a risk. You fell for his line, dintcha? Prob’ly told ya how sorry he was. Said Mickey started it.”

“Actually, sir—”

The wolverine stabs a finger into my chest. “That ain’t the way we do things here in Lake Handerson, boy. You got me? Maybe a night in the tank’ll cool ya down.”

“Sir—”

Only then does the chief turn to Chaz. “You got a problem with this, Hartley? Maybe you wanna go back to graveyard shift?”

“It’s okay,” I say quickly. “I’ll stay in the cell.”

“You don’t get to tell me you’ll stay in the cell, boy,” the chief says. “I tell you you gonna stay in the cell.” He pauses. “You gonna stay in the cell. Chaz, book ’im and take his personals.”

Chaz’s eyes say he’s sorry, but all he says out loud is, “Come with me, please?”

The wolverine gives me a shove as I walk past him. I hear him hawk up something to spit, and time the swinging of my tail to pull it quickly to one side. Something brushes it and splashes wetly on the floor. For a moment, I imagine him telling me to come back and lick it up, but apparently we’re not in a prison-themed B-movie, because he lets Chaz take me to the booking room without further interference.

The rest of the station is much less clean, and smaller to boot. I hand over my personal effects to Chaz in a small room with a desk, a chair, and the smell of antiseptic cleanser. “You want to make a phone call?” he says. “If you want to make two, you can.”

I nod. “Can I see my phone?” I flip through the address book until I find the number I want, and then dial it, praying he’ll pick up.

He does. For a moment, I’m not sure how to say it, and then I think, hell with it, just get it out there. “Hi, Father,” I say. “I’m in jail.”

25

Contained (Lee)

He takes it remarkably well. “Do you need me to come down right away?”

“I think they wanna keep me here overnight.”

“Overnight? Did you kill someone?”

“Um.” I tell him what happened, in brief.

There’s silence. I can hear the clicking of his claws on his desk. “I didn’t mean—” I begin.

“Is this something new with kids? Should I be worried that your football player is going to show up at the office here and throw me into a toolbox?”

“You don’t have toolboxes. You work in an office.”

“File cabinet, then. Sweet Fox, Wiley, what did you think you would accomplish?”

I sigh. “I just wanted to let you know where I am. I can’t tell Dev, because he’ll fly up here and miss the game.”

“I’m glad I’m your second choice, at least.”

“Third, actually, but I’m not sure I can call my boss anymore since technically I don’t have one as of Monday.”

“You quit?”

Of course he’d go there first. “I’ll tell you the rest of the story sometime.” Chaz is looking curiously at me. I don’t really want to badmouth Dev’s dad in front of him.

“So you quit, or you got fired, or something, and then you

decided to blow off steam by driving up to your boyfriend's hometown and picking a fight with his father."

"Gee," I say, "when you say it like that, it sounds so soap-opera."

"You *are* in jail."

"Oh, thanks, I'd almost forgotten. How embarrassing would that be, getting up to go out for Starbucks and running right into the bars." Now Chaz just looks puzzled, like, you wasted your phone call on this? I mouth, *I know,* to him.

"You hate Starbucks, don't you?"

"Yeah. Thank goodness for the bars, then, huh?"

He sighs. "Lake Handerson, you said."

"You don't need to come up here. I just wanted you to know—"

"Don't be an idiot, Wiley. You called because you wanted me to come, so I'll come."

"I just called you because..." I trail off. I have a vision of Father walking into the police station, and to my surprise, my chest warms and my fur sleeks down, my tail relaxing to swing easily around the leg of the chair. "All right. If you insist."

"Can it wait 'til I'm done work? This report has to go out today."

"Sure. I'm good here. I think they have to feed me now."

I'm about to give the phone back to Chaz when a thought occurs to me. "One more?" He nods, and I flip open the phone. "This'll be quick."

Quicker than I thought; I get his voicemail. "Hi, Hal," I say. "Hey, so I kind of broke my promise about doing something illegal. You don't happen to know any way to get a guy out of jail, do you? I won't have my phone, but I'm up in Lake Handerson, and, well, I guess there's probably not a lot you can do. I think my father's coming up. I'll give you a call tomorrow. It'll be a hell of a story."

Probably shouldn't have called him, but I was feeling a little desperate. Besides, if he could have helped, it would've been nice

to be out of jail already when Father gets here. Or to be able to call him back later. I already feel guilty dragging him out of work, not to mention I don't want to owe him anything.

Chaz shows me to cell number two, a small cement-block fixer-upper with all the amenities: an open toilet in the corner that reeks, and a flat wooden bench a foot away that smells only marginally better. The bench stretches a good eight feet, from the bars at the door to the graffiti carved into the back wall. Sitting on it, I could stretch out a leg and almost touch the other side of the cell. "This is the drunk tank?"

He shrugs, jerking a thumb to his left. "That one is. But I figgered, we got empty cells, why not give ya some privacy? Not that Johnny's likely to wake up 'fore dawn."

"Y'know, a place like this would go for a grand a month in Port City." I lift my nose to get a scent of Johnny's species next door, but all I can smell is urine, too powerfully mustelid to narrow down to a species, and alcohol. "I appreciate privacy. How about a bed?" I say. "Asking too much?"

He points to the bench. "I got a couple blankets I can toss in. What'cha want to eat?"

I ponder. "How about coq au vin with a side of truffled mashed potatoes and a glass of Champagne Mandois Premier Cru?"

"That'd be the Burger King International Chicken Sandwich with fries and a Sprite, then."

"Diet Sprite," I say.

He gives me a baleful look. I tug on my torn sleeve. "Come on," I say. "I ripped off my sleeve."

"I'll see what I can do. Diet Sprite," he grumbles, and walks out.

I watch him go, then sit back on the bench and curl my tail around my hips. With nothing else to occupy me, my mind races back to the fight. I should've just walked away. What the hell is Dev going to say when he finds out? I'm not really worried he'll break up with me. I am worried I might've just ruined things forever between him and his family.

Not for us, though, hopefully. And I did find out something very helpful, that Ivan doesn't care that Mikhail has a gay son. So Mikhail's concerns about 'the guys at the auto shop' are at least not universally warranted. Though Ivan doesn't seem the sort to voice his own opinions strongly, certainly not around the more dominant Mikhail.

I lean back against the wall and close my eyes. I can't help but think that whatever Mikhail does to me after this is going to be a doozy. Dislocate my thumb? I'll embarrass you in the tabloids. Get me fired? I'll throw you against a toolbox and put you in the hospital. How does he top that one? It's like some kind of domestic Fibonacci series of violence, and where I should've stopped it, I continued it without meaning to.

Which leads me to the scary thought, the one I've been avoiding. What if...

No. He's fine. The EMT said so. He should know. Think about something else.

So I think about football. I run through the Dragons' current woes in my head and my list of prospects. I think about the kids I've looked at, and I think about the big bear Victor King. If I get out of this, I tell myself, I'm going to look him up and write him again. I'm going to arrange for Dev to see him in the off-season and talk to him.

I wonder what his parents are like, if they're the kind who'd be open to it if only he'd confide in them, or if they're the fundie type who would kick him out. Probably the dad is much more into the macho image, all about a man being the strong guy who knocks down his enemies, keeps his wife aproned and pregnant, tosses back beers at the bar, and has belching contests. Then again, I shouldn't stereotype based on species. I hate it when people assume I'm trying to put one over on them just because I'm a fox. It makes it so much harder to put one over on them.

But I wasn't trying to put one over on Dev's father. I was honestly just trying to get him to understand. My big plan, the idea

I was sure was going to work, failed. He didn't care who fucks whom in our relationship. Doesn't care that his son's the one on top. I thought for sure that that'd do it. Hell, I pretty much opened right up to him, and he just blew it off.

Though he didn't really come off as extremely bigoted. He never called me a sodomite, never said I was going to hell. He never called me a faggot, not to my face. He just said I'd turned Dev against him. So he's one of those "it's okay, but not in my family" guys. I guess, like Ivan said.

If that's the case, though, why did he keep talking to me? Why didn't he just throw me out? He kept the conversation going. He felt strongly enough to fight about it. About what? What more does he want? I feel like I'm close to something. Maybe there was something he said during our first visit? I can't remember anything properly except his paw closing around mine, the snap of the ligament. I flex my wrist and rub the splint on my thumb. *He ain't violent,* Ivan said. Ha. Well, now he's in the hospital.

He's in the hospital, and I'm in jail. The presence of the bars makes me feel guilty the longer I stare at them. I didn't do anything wrong, I tell myself. Maybe the grab on the sleeve that started it, but I didn't try to throw him into a toolbox. I want to tell Dev all of it, to make sure he hears it from me, but I can't disturb him for two more days.

Though I could leave him a voicemail. He'll be in practice all day with his phone off. I'll just say I had a talk with his father and he didn't kill me, and I'll call him back after the game to tell him more. He'll suspect it's not good news, but I'll tell him not to call me back, and he'll have to listen to that because I won't answer the phone if he calls again.

So when Chaz comes back with lunch, I call in that favor he offered. He brings the phone over to the cell and pushes it through with the food. Dev's voicemail picks up, of course, and I leave the message just the way I rehearsed it. "I'm fine," I say. "Win the game, I'll call you Sunday night." It won't work. He'll know right

away something's wrong. But he'll know I'm not hurt.

Chaz grins. He got himself a big pile of vegetables between two buns, which he enjoys at the bare desk outside the cell while I dig into the fast-food fried chicken sandwich he got me. "So, you a huge Firebirds fan?"

"Duh," I say. "But 'til Monday, I worked for the Dragons. College scout."

That gets him interested, and for most of the afternoon, we talk about football, only taking breaks when the chief pokes his head in to ask why Chaz isn't at his desk. "He's a risk," Chaz protests. "I'm just keepin' an eye on him."

"Reason we got bars is so you don't hafta," the chief grumbles. But he doesn't order Chaz back to his desk. "At least get yer paperwork done if yer gonna be yakkin' it up in here all day."

At the end of the day, Chaz offers to run out again to get me dinner. "We got a sandwich machine here, but that's kinda..." He sticks his tongue out.

"You don't have to," I say.

"You don't have to be sittin' in the cell," he says, "But y'are."

I perk my ears. "Coq au vin?"

He rolls his eyes. "McGrilled Chicken it is."

I make a show of licking my lips. He snorts, and waves goodbye.

A day of sitting on the wooden bench leaves my butt hurting worse than the day after the no-lube night. So I sit cross-legged on the floor and lean up against the wall. The station is quiet except for a series of snores from the adjacent cell.

About half an hour after Chaz leaves, there's an argument outside. I pad to the bars and stick my ear between them. Through the snores next door, I hear a familiar vulpine voice, and with a warm flush, I recognize my father. The door's partly open, so when I cup my ears, I can hear some of the words. The chief says things like, "City folk," and my dad says, "due process," but the chief successfully defends his home turf, and in the end nobody comes in

to release me.

Chaz does come in with a McD's bag, twenty minutes later. He tells me the chief is dead set on holding me on suspicion until morning. Father apparently said something about getting a lawyer and the chief said when he was ordered to release me, he would. Chaz doesn't think that'll be anytime soon. "Didn't have no lawyer with him."

"So I'm gonna sleep here."

"Looks that way. Sorry. Lemme get you that blanket."

"Do you have two?"

He does. I fold them onto the bench and sit on them, because I'm not cold yet. When he leaves, the jail grows very quiet. It leaves me alone with my thoughts, even though the officer on night duty, a short skunk, pokes her muzzle in from time to time.

The isolation, the bars of the jail, the stark white lighting all make me feel small and alone. Father really came for me, though, and that's something. He'll get me out in the morning, I think, but then I wonder, what if he doesn't? What if Mikhail presses charges and I'm convicted of assault and battery? What a great story that'd make for Hal. When I wrote my story in my head, I was the noble suffering figure, beset by injustice on all sides, fighting the good fight. And yet, here I am, having put someone in the hospital because I couldn't leave well enough alone.

I know I'd promised to be less pushy, and I tried. But when it's the right thing to do, when I can't think of any other way to make things better, what else can I do? It's not like I gave in to impulse and ran down the block to yell at Mikhail. I called his wife. I thought out what I was going to say. The alternative, leaving things alone, would just have prolonged Dev's and my suffering—and his parents' suffering, for that matter.

His father's suffering. I push that image away again, but my imagination keeps bringing it back. It wasn't my fault, not entirely, but I can't evade responsibility for it, for any of it.

Dev would be frantic just to know his father's in the hospital. His father, who's generally been an asshole, and worse. Whereas my father, whom I've gone out of my way not to talk to, drove all the way up here to get me out of jail. He threatened a wolverine with a lawyer. I press fingers to my eyes and think about what an

asshole I've been to him in the past. At least I've already started to make it up to him. I can do more. I will do more. Whatever he's going through with Mother is their business. It's not really about me, no matter how it started. But I can be there for him to talk to.

I'll see him at Thanksgiving. I should've gone last year, no matter what Mother said or did. *If you'd come last year…*

And Dev's father: *If he were strong, he would be here.*

I didn't go to Thanksgiving because my mother made me feel uncomfortable. Dev didn't talk to his father because he was afraid of what he might say. They put up the barriers, but we allowed them to stand.

Dev and I have a lot more in common than you might think from looking at us. Or meeting us. We think the same way about things, we like each other's company, and we have grown to trust each other. We know that each of us is looking out for the other as much as himself. That's what makes a family, at the core of it, that closeness and trust. When people's worlds get too far apart, their connections can't hold. Everyone likes to pretend that families are forever, but divorces happen. Kids get disowned, parents get put into retirement homes and forgotten. Brothers fight, sisters fight, grandparents, aunts, uncles.

Do some people stay together longer than they should, because of some blood relationship? Sure. But then there's my father. If we were just friends, he'd never have come all the way up here to get me out of jail. And there's Dev's father. However misguided his methods, I believe he really does love his son, so fiercely that he would hurt both of them in the short term to do what he thinks is best for the family in the long term.

Can't say the same for my parents. But I have Dev. We're as close as if we were married, and if this last month hasn't proven that, then nothing will. I don't seem to be able to keep other people in my life, besides him. But that's okay, because I've never needed a lot of other people. As long as I have my tiger. As long as I didn't completely fuck things up today.

Well, hey, if I did, then maybe my father and I can move into an apartment together. It'd be like a sitcom. "Farrel and Son. Join a fox and his son as they try to set up a new life. The father's recently divorced his intolerant wife over their gay son, who's on parole for putting his ex-boyfriend's father into a coma." I can hear the laugh track as I bring home a flamboyant drag queen and my father, thinking he's a girl, falls for "her."

Life would be a lot easier if it were a sitcom. No matter what the situation, you could be sure that in half an hour, it'd be over. Every week you'd start back in the same place. You could do whatever you wanted and you'd never have to worry about change. Occasionally, we'd learn a meaningful lesson. If this were one of those episodes, I'd tell Father at the end of it how much I've learned to appreciate him in the last half hour. Then next week, we'd be back to normal.

But the one I really want to talk to isn't Father. While Mikhail's in the hospital, we're all suspended, waiting, and Dev has no reason to hate me, no reason not to talk to me. Just as well my cell phone's sitting there in the desk. I don't think I'd be able to resist the temptation to call if I had it on me. I miss my tiger with an ache like broken ribs, a pressure in my chest that brings my fingers to my eyes again.

I won't cry, not here. I'm strong. Whatever I've done, I'll live with it. And, I reflect, it could easily have been me lying in the hospital, though I doubt Mikhail would be in jail right now if it were. And then Dev would be equally crushed, wouldn't he? Nothing his father said would help, if he would even say anything. Maybe he'd just let Dev hear about it on the news.

The image of that scene in my mind stirs thoughts. Dev and his father talking, arguing. I laugh silently; like anyone would care enough to televise my injury. Unless it was public knowledge that I was Dev's boyfriend. That'd be funny, wouldn't it? If Mikhail's spiteful outing came back to haunt him? *Why did I have to hear about this on television?* I'm sure I wouldn't appreciate the joke. At

least it'd be worse than Dev coming out on television, right?

I stare at the ceiling, thinking harder about the things I've heard both my father and Dev's say. Insight flickers and blossoms. The familiar temptation of believing I've figured things out returns, full force, and refuses to go away. It's frustrating. What am I supposed to do about it *now*? As if I haven't fucked things up enough. But if I was looking at things all wrong, if I have it right this time… My tail flicks. Do I trust myself to try again?

I should sleep on it. Not that I have a choice. It's chilly in the cell, but my undercoat is already coming in. So I lie down on the blankets rather than under them, fold my arms behind my head, and close my eyes. Rubbing absently at my ears, I wait for tomorrow.

26

Time Out (Dev)

The voicemail from Lee is so bland, so reassuring, that I worry immediately. I don't register why until I play it back. Then I hear, or at least I imagine, the strain in his voice. Forced cheerfulness. I want to make Gerrard listen to it so he can confirm it, but I realize that's silly. Nobody else knows Lee well enough to read his moods.

What's more worrying is that there's nothing I can do. He tells me to focus on football, as he always does. I pace back and forth in the locker room until Charm grabs me to go out to dinner.

It isn't until we're at dinner that I think of the one thing I can do. I excuse myself and take out the cell phone, pull up the home number, and stare at it. If Lee was trying to protect me...if things did go bad...then do I really want to talk to Dad two days before the game? I'm already dialing. I have to know.

It rings four times, and then goes to voice mail. I listen to my father's recorded message, and hang up without saying anything.

I pull up Lee's number next. He probably won't answer, but at least I can try that one. Lee knows how to reassure me, even if there is something wrong.

Sure enough, that one goes to voice mail too. I leave him a quick message saying, "Hope it's all going well. I'll talk to you soon." I pause and then say, "Love you."

At least, I think as I pocket the phone and head back to the

dinner, Dad didn't call me afterwards. Lee must have calmed him down somehow. I guess that's a good sign. I pocket the phone and go back to dinner, but even though logic tells me everything's okay, I can't shake a feeling of unease.

This whole idea of Lee's has confused the hell out of me, frankly. I know how hard it is for Lee to admit that he's the one who gets fucked. But I don't think Dad knows how hard it is, and I don't think he cares. He just wants me to respect him and respect the family, and somehow that means getting rid of Lee. I thought he'd respect me for standing up for myself, at the restaurant, but he wanted more than that. It's kind of like how he didn't want me playing football at first, and then I found out after I'd been accepted to Forester that he wanted me to go to a top football school to play.

But Lion Christ, if anyone can make crazy ideas work, Lee can. He got me invited to the football scouting combine, got me drafted by the Dragons, talked himself into a scouting job there with no football experience. Dad's capable of violence, but really, it's not like he's ever bashed anyone's head in. And Lee called me afterwards. I get a cartoony image of a trembling Lee making the call while Dad holds a gun to his head.

It makes me laugh. Things like that happen in the movies. Lee was fine. What probably happened was that he had a conversation with Dad, it didn't go great, and he's hoping to have another talk. He doesn't want me to worry about him until he's tried all the tricks in his arsenal.

And how wonderful would it be if he actually succeeded? I lie back in bed and have a nice little fantasy about going back to my family's house for Thanksgiving, with Lee beside me. He meets my brother and puts him in his place so skilfully that Gregory doesn't notice. He charms my mother and talks football with my father, now thawed. Just like he did at Gerrard's that afternoon.

That's what Lee sees, what my father doesn't: that Lee's part of my family now, maybe not by blood, but just as important to me.

Family grows; we added Marta when Gregory married her. They added Alexi, and they'll add another cub soon. Dad's friend Ivan has been his mechanic for years; he's like family. Hell, Charm is basically family to me and I haven't known him more than a year.

And family is family. It's not like the team—I mean, sure, when we're winning it feels great, and everyone's happy. But I've been on bad teams, too. On the Dragons, we almost never went out after games. Everyone went back to his hotel room or apartment. The coaches barely talked to us except to tell us what we were doing wrong. Guys were cut or traded mid-week, and replacements showed up without warning as the management tried desperately to find a combination that could win. I was a rook then, so maybe it was different. I know with the Firebirds, I see new practice squad guys every week or so. So maybe it's not so different. But it felt different.

I stretch my paws back behind my head and rub my ears, resting my head on my folded arms. Best not to get my hopes up. But at least, if nothing else, I can make it through Thanksgiving. I'll be okay. It'll be tough, but I've gotten through tough things before—with Lee's help. I think about dinner without me, just to test my resolve. It hurts, but not as much as it used to. The anger at my father helps. I think I'd end up throwing cranberry sauce at him.

Breathe out, breathe in. Close my eyes. Head in the game.

That's when my cell phone rings.

27

Injury Timeout (Lee)

I'm up before the station opens. It's dim, pre-dawn, though I can see the clock on the wall that reads five 'til six just fine. The light didn't wake me; it's the yelling of the guy next to me, who finally woke up. "I'm hungry!" he yells. "Gemme food!"

Sounds like a smaller guy: pine marten, or weasel. Also sounds like he doesn't have many teeth left. I don't want to engage with him at first, but the night duty officer doesn't say anything when she looks in to check on us. So after half an hour of monotonous yelling, I yell back. "They're not gonna come in for another hour and a half."

The jail goes quiet. Then he starts again. "I'm hungry! Gemme food!"

"Shut up!" I yell back, but it has just as little effect. I fold my ears down and close my eyes, but I can't get back to sleep.

It takes him another forty-five minutes to get tired of that, at which point he starts an off-pitch chorus of "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaye ain't got nobody...nobody cares for me...nobody...nobody...nobody..." Sadly, those are all the words he knows, so he goes back to the beginning again every time, after just enough of a pause to make me hope he's burst a blood vessel in his brain.

No such luck. The rattle of keys in the lock half an hour later is like the sweet ringing of bells. I sit up, rubbing my eyes, to see

Chaz carrying two paper bags in. I smell eggs and hashbrowns, but he doesn't slide them through the bars, just sets them on the table. "Shut up, Johnny," he says mildly, and gets nothing more in response than another loud chorus from the marten, or whatever he is.

I crack a grin. "I hope you can teach him something else. Or at least sing harmony."

He waves a hand, on his way to grab a key ring from the desk drawer. I jump up from the bench, tail wagging though it feels like it's creaking as it does. "Johnny knows a jukebox worth'a songs, but he only sings one a day. Ain't that right, Johnny?"

"You get me my Egg Muffin With Cheese?" the marten says.

"Didn't know you'd be upright, Johnny. You can have the one I got Mister Farrel here, in a second." Chaz comes to my cell and unlocks it. "Your dad's here, with a lawyer. Chief says you gotta come with us to the hospital until Mickey makes a statement."

"I wanted to go there anyway." Stepping out of the cell feels spine-tingling, liberating, exciting. I want to run across the small room, jump up and down, wag my tail. I restrain myself to the latter, smoothing down my clothes and following Chaz. Before I leave, I sneak a peek and see Johnny, an ermine poking his narrow muzzle between the bars.

He raises a paw. "I's great t'have a father," he says, his bloodshot eyes mournful. "I 'ad one once. I 'ad three once. Then I got thrown out of the church. Oh, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaye...ain't got no...body..."

"I'll bring yer breakfast in a tick, Johnny," Chaz says, closing the door behind me. We walk out to the front, and there's my father, with a tall, muscular wolf packed into a business suit. The wolf is arguing with the chief, staying easily calm while the shorter wolverine is clearly trying not to get agitated. My father's ears pop straight up when he sees me, and he comes over to hug me.

I hug back and inhale his scent, my nose against his cheekruff. "Phew," he says. "Smells like you slept in those clothes."

“I didn’t want Chaz to have any surprises when he came in,” I say. I squint at his name tag. “Sorry. Officer Hartley.”

He rubs his antlers. “Ah, I seen worse,” he says. “Johnny don’t always keep his pants on.”

Father’s looking wary, probably because the chief and lawyer are still arguing behind him. So I say, “He was really nice. He got me Burger King. And Diet Sprite.”

My father’s expression softens. “Well, I appreciate it.” He extends a paw. “Brenly Farrel.”

“Chaz Hartley. Aw, y’know, the kid didn’t mean nothin’. It’s just S.O.P., that’s all.”

“Funny kind of ‘standard’ you have up here,” Father says, but I jerk my head toward the chief, and Father gets the hint. We turn and cup our ears to listen.

The chief’s not quite yelling at the lawyer yet, but he’s close. “Hospital visitin’ hours ain’t ’til ten!”

“Then I guess we’re going to get some breakfast.” The wolf taps a paper on the desk. “We’ve agreed to appear at the hospital, even though it’s an unduly restrictive condition of release.”

“He’s a suspect…”

“He’s a participant in a minor altercation who has already declined to press charges. *If* Mister Miski chooses to press charges, *and* you decide to effect an arrest, *then* we will discuss further the necessary procedures. Hello, Wiley,” he says, cutting off the chief’s protest and turning to me. “I hope you haven’t said anything to these officers yet.”

My father keeps an arm around my shoulders. “I don’t know about that,” I say. “I told them what happened.”

“All right. We’ll talk over breakfast. I’m sure you’re fairly hungry.” He straightens his tie and perks his ears in Chaz’s direction. “Where’s a good breakfast place around here?”

The chief stalks off to his office. Chaz points us to a place called Terrie’s, three blocks over, not too far from the hospital. “Good luck,” he tells me, and then whispers, as my father and the lawyer

are leaving, “Anyone who rips his shirt sleeve to help a guy he just decked is okay in my book.”

Startled, I look back. He just grins and puts a finger to his lips. I flick my ears forward and return the grin. “Thanks,” I say. “Anyone who gets me Diet Sprite is more than okay in mine.”

We shake. “I gotta go feed Johnny,” he says. So I wave goodbye to him, feeling less alone in Lake Handerson.

Terrie’s is a diner, good for butter-soaked breakfasts, which is what we all get. After a night in jail, I figure I deserve it. I love the smell of grease and the cloudy morning light coming in through the windows over the plastic tabletops. I love the straw dispenser for soda pops at lunch and dinner and the old-school jukebox in the corner. I love the porcupine waitress in the gingham apron who comes to take our order. It’s amazing how little time in jail it takes for you to develop a whole new appreciation for life and the little things in it. I keep grinning even though the wolf, sitting across from me, looks dead serious the whole time.

He introduces himself as Geoff Vogt, Esquire. Just like that, with the “esquire.” After he gets my version of events in the first ten minutes, he spends the next hour telling me I’ll be fine, that I didn’t do anything wrong, and asking my father to consider a suit against the police for harassment. “I hate these small-town cops who just have to leverage every miniscule scrap of power they have. They ignore the law, unless it helps them resolve their little petty grievances, or makes them look like big puffed-up important bigwigs. I can’t tell you the number of abuse of law cases I’ve seen come out of small towns just like this one. But they’re like any bully. You stand up to them and they back right down.” He points a fork at me. “You remember that. Both you foxes remember that.”

While he takes a break to eat, my father gives me a look and a half-smile. “Mr. Vogt was recommended by Uncle Roger.”

“Went to school with a friend of his.” Vogt wipes egg from his muzzle. “Anyway, I’ll come with you to the hospital, and then if you need my help, I’ll be there. They won’t mess with you.”

“Thanks,” my father says, though when Vogt goes to the bathroom, he says, “He’s a little overbearing. If you don’t want him in the hospital…”

I shrug. “I don’t mind more protection. I don’t really know what’s going to happen.”

“You think he’ll press charges?”

“He might. I hope not.”

“Have you told your tiger?”

I shake my head. “Waiting ’til after the game. I don’t want to distract him.”

“You don’t think the family will call him?”

That’s part of what I’ve been trying not to worry about. “Maybe. But I told him I’d call him after the game, so hopefully…”

He scoops up some hashbrowns—the real kind, not the McShredded Potatoes. “I guess you know him.”

“Yeah.” I’ve already devoured my food. I watch him eat. “Hey. Thanks for coming.”

“Ah, well, I had to.”

Vogt emerges from the bathroom, so I finish what I have to say quickly. “You didn’t, really. But I appreciate it. It means a lot. I mean, I’d be sitting in jail if not for you and Mister Vogt here.”

I gesture to Vogt as he sits down. “Probably,” he says. “That chief looks like he’d keep you as long as he could. Speaking of which, we should walk over to the hospital now.”

“I’ll take care of this,” my father says, getting his wallet out. Vogt doesn’t argue.

We walk over to the hospital together, Vogt still going on about some small-town case he took on and won. It feels comfortable walking beside my father, a morning walk over cold, snowy streets. The sun is trying hard to break through the clouds, but has not yet managed to succeed. We don’t really talk, but we don’t have to. I already know my father’s storing up some of the things he’s thinking, just like I am, to talk about later. And to be honest, I’m not exactly itching to get to the hospital. I’m pretty happy to be out

of jail, but the hospital doesn't feel much more open, as we come up to the large white complex.

It is the same one Dev took me to, I see now. I recognize the emergency room entrance, though it looks brighter during the day, even with the cloud cover. I slow down, and my father keeps pace with me. I point to my splint. "Second time I've been to this hospital in two months."

He looks at my paw, then up at the hospital. "Maybe they have a frequent patient program you can join."

"Only if there's a family plan."

I'm happy to see a slight smile on his muzzle. Only as we hurry to catch up to Vogt does it occur to me that I just referred to Mikhail as family.

It's not really close to ten when we get there, but we're told that Mikhail is awake, and we can see him at ten. We set up in the waiting area while Vogt coaches me on things to say and not to say. "Don't admit guilt. Get him to say he started it, if you can. At least make sure he doesn't get away with saying you did. And don't apologize. Also, don't tell him you were in jail already. He might see that as an admission of guilt."

"What *can* I say to him?" My father catches the sarcasm, I see from the quirk of his lips and quick flick back and forth of his ears, but Vogt doesn't.

"Ask how he's doing. If he says he's not hurt, that's good."

"I'll try to lead him on."

That, he catches. "Look, one word can make a huge difference," he says. "I've seen people with the best of intentions lose everything because they said the wrong thing in front of the wrong people."

I feel rather defiant, having won a fight, or at least survived, and having spent a night in jail. Knowing that Mikhail isn't dead or in a coma or something helps, even if I'm here in the hospital and can feel how tenuous my situation is. "I can take care of myself."

"Not in a courtroom, you can't." His eyes fix mine until I look

away. “Okay? Okay.”

He coaches me until five to ten, when the chief arrives, with a different officer accompanying him, a tiger. They talk to the nurse at registration, and then sit on the opposite side of the waiting room from where we are. Vogt doesn’t say any more to me after that.

When visiting hours do open, the chief muscles past us and tries to keep us out, until Vogt’s insistence that I have a right to be present to hear any charges made against me wins out. Father has to wait outside, because they’ll only technically allow two visitors at a time. The doctor, a short grey wolf, makes an exception for me to have a lawyer there, but she won’t allow anyone else.

I’m surprised to see Duscha sitting on a chair beside Mikhail’s bed. I guess she doesn’t count as a visitor. She’s wearing a plain dress, and her fur looks matted in spots. There’s a second bed, empty but disheveled, so I’m guessing she spent the night here. The television in the corner of the room is playing a game show. Duscha clicks it off as we enter.

Mikhail looks worse, but not as bad as I’d feared. His hospital robes barely conceal his large frame, and the bandage on his head is just a square of gauze. I can see around the edges that the fur’s been shaved there. The gauze isn’t bloody, which is a relief.

They both look up as we enter. Duscha's eyes widen when she sees me; Mikhail's narrow.

"Mickey!" The chief rushes up before anyone else has a chance to say anything. "How ya feelin'?"

"Good enough." Mikhail keeps looking at me. "Sore."

“Course, course. Don’t worry, you’ll be up and fixin’ transmissions before we know it.”

“Ivan fixes the transmissions,” Mikhail says.

“The doctor says he can go home this afternoon, probably.” Duscha speaks up gently. “Tomorrow at the latest. They did an EEG as a precaution.”

The chief shadow-punches Mikhail. “Tough guy like you.”

“Thank you, Ken.” Mikhail clears his throat and points at me. “Why is he here?”

“Well, look. We need to get a statement from ya about what happened yesterday. Need to know if you wanna press charges.”

“Charges?” He looks faintly confused. “I fell.”

The wolverine jerks a thumb back toward me. “He says you threw a punch at him and he dodged, and pulled you down. Says you hit your head on the toolbox by accident.” He tries to make the last two words sarcastic, but he’s no fox.

Vogt, beside me, sighs. I speak low enough that the small-eared wolverine and tigers don’t catch it. “I had to tell the truth,” I say.

He whispers similarly back. “There are a lot of honorable people in jail.”

“One less, as of this morning.”

He snorts. Mikhail, meanwhile, has returned his attention to the chief. “It does not matter.” Mikhail sighs. “I do not remember.”

“The fight?”

The large tiger reaches up to his whiskers, grooming them. “I remember this fox, coming to the garage. I have…argued with him in the past. We exchanged words, he touched my shirt. I pushed him away.” His eyebrows crease. “That is all I remember.”

“You could press charges,” the chief says. “Battery, probably assault.”

“Assault?” Mikhail says the word as though it’s a foreign word he’s hearing for the first time.

Vogt steps forward. “I’d better not hear any leading,” he says.

“Let the guy make up his own mind,” the wolverine snarls.

“Exactly what I’m trying to do.” Vogt folds his arms. “If he wishes, he can certainly bring charges and have a very public trial in which everyone will hear about how this…” He pauses. “…fox put him in the hospital.”

Mikhail glares up at Vogt. “None of this is necessary. It is just a fight.”

Duscha, to my surprise, speaks. “Mikhail will not press charges,” she says. She looks at me. “But not because he does not remember, and not because he is ashamed, and not because you stayed and tended to his injury.” Now her husband turns his head, staring at her with the rest of us. “He will not press charges because you did not.”

Mikhail turns back to me. His ears are flat, his eyes still hard, but he nods, once. “I…lost my temper.”

“So did I,” I say, quickly.

“You don’t have to listen to them,” the chief says.

Vogt coughs. He steps between Mikhail and the wolverine, and faces the chief. “I believe I heard a decision. Do you need anything else from him?”

“We need ta get his story. For the record.”

“I see.” He makes a show of checking the time on his phone. “You need that this minute?”

The chief cranes his neck to look around the large wolf. “Mickey, you let the doc know if you need me for anything, okay? Anything. I’ll send someone right over.”

Vogt tries to usher all of us out. I turn, and the television in the corner catches my eye. My insight surfaces again in my mind, stubborn. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but I have to take the chance. I have to believe in myself. I look back at Dev’s parents. “Mind if I stay?”

“I don’t think it’s advisable.” The wolf gives me a push between the shoulderblades. He hasn’t touched the chief, who’s waiting to see what happens.

Mikhail sounds tired. “I do not want to talk to him.”

“There,” the chief says. “You heard him.”

But again, Duscha speaks up. “I would like him to stay.”

Again, we all stare. “Duscha,” Mikhail starts, but she cuts him off.

“He stayed to tend your wound. You—we—should do him the courtesy of hearing what he has to say.” She sits firmly upright.

“I’ll be quick,” I promise. “Five minutes. Ten if you say something back.”

“No.” Mikhail growls it, but Duscha lays a paw on his arm.

“Yes,” she says.

He looks at her and then exhales, a long, exaggerated sigh. “Fine. Five minutes.”

“You heard him.” Vogt ushers the chief out of the room. He turns at the doorway and points at me. “I don’t need to tell you to stay five feet back from the bed at all times, right?”

I hold up a paw. “Promise.”

They close the door, leaving me with Dev’s parents. Mikhail affects boredom, but I see the twitching of his tail under the covers. Duscha’s expression is mildly encouraging.

I arch my tail and walk toward them, until the scent of tiger overwhelms the sterile hospital smell. I stop there, standing awkwardly, tail swishing slowly behind me. A beam of sunlight brightens between me and Mikhail. He squints, looking like he’s about to be given a dose of foul-tasting medicine.

That doesn’t make it easier to talk to him. I kinda want to start yelling at him, to say that if he’d just listened to me, he wouldn’t be in the hospital. It’s hard to know where to begin. So I start with the easy thing, the one I know I have to say and want to get out of the way. “I’m sorry,” I say. “About the fight.”

He nods, curtly. “I mean,” I go on, “I’m not sorry I came here. There’s stuff you needed to hear. Still do.”

“I am not interested in what you think I need,” he says.

I hook my thumbs into my pockets, resisting the temptation to get closer. “I think you are,” I say. “I really didn’t come up here to

start a fight."

"I know that." He looks scornful.

"But you came down to start one."

At that, he looks uncomfortable. Duscha gives him a sharp look. "I...came down to listen to you."

I laugh shortly. "It's okay," I say. "I expected you to want to fight. I thought I could convince you not to."

Duscha speaks up. "He was going to tell you that he doesn't have to come back with Devlin. And..."

"He told me that." Mikhail tries not to be curious about the rest. I see the tail twitching, though.

This is the part I'd thought would be tough. Doing it for Dev helps a lot. Also it helps to know it'll annoy Mikhail when he thinks about our fight. "I was going to say that you don't have to think your son is...well, whatever you think gay people are. But I didn't realize that..." I curl my tail around my leg and glance at Duscha. "That's not what you were worried about."

"You have no idea what I am worried about," Mikhail says, but it's slow, not as combative as his attitude in the garage.

"You were right about a lot of things," I say. "Sort of. I never tried to pull Dev away from you. But." I bite my lip. They're both staring at me. "I wasn't exactly pushing him toward you, either."

"Devlin makes his own choices," Duscha says. "We know he loves us."

"Yeah," I say. "But he's afraid of losing that. And I'm not exactly doing great with my own family. My mother..." I pause. Mikhail yawns; Duscha sits politely, but it's clear that my family history isn't of great interest. I hurry it up. "She won't talk to me. Because I'm gay. So naturally, I thought that's what you were doing to Dev. I didn't realize until last night that you're not."

"Do not believe that I approve of...this." Mikhail's paw waves lazily in my direction, encompassing me, my relationship with Dev, and anything else in the vicinity.

"I don't," I say. "But I also know that's not why you're angry.

Not the main reason."

The affected boredom vanishes. Mikhail's tail stops dead. "Go on," Duscha says.

"See, all I heard from Dev was the problems with the family," I say. "All that stuff I said in the garage, about you needing to be more supportive, it's true. I heard that from Dev. But I never heard the good part, the part that mattered." I take a breath. "For that, too, I'm sorry."

Mikhail's scent now reminds me of Dev's even more. He and Duscha watch me intently. "Dev wants you to be part of his life, and you to be part of his. But when you stop talking, it can be hard to start up again. And it doesn't help when, like, he announces that he's gay to the world before telling you. You wonder why. You think he's turned his back on you, and you get mad at him, and then he thinks you want to shut him out too. But you don't, neither of you. He wants to tell you these things. He wants to listen to what you have to say. You just have to stop yelling at each other and talk." I look down. "I go through that with him, too."

Duscha nods. Mikhail's eyes flick over my shoulder, at some imaginary picture of his son. "He is stubborn."

"So are you," Duscha says. He scowls.

I don't grin. It takes an effort. "The thing is, we're all here in this hospital room because we love him. But I love who he is now. You love who he used to be. You think your son is gone, that if you can wipe away this relationship, get me out of the picture, that you can have him back."

They both watch me intently. The silence when I pause hurts my ears. I push on. "I need to learn to love who he used to be, the cub you raised. And you need to learn to love who he is now."

I look from Duscha to Mikhail. They look thoughtful, almost tender, but they don't speak. So I keep going. "He's really struggling to figure out who he is, what his place is. Not just in our relationship, or in your family, but in the world. He needs you, and me. He needs all of us."

They say nothing, but I'm out of words. Finally, they look at each other, then at me. "We have not stopped loving him." Duscha speaks up when Mikhail doesn't. "Never."

"No," Mikhail says. "No matter how insolent or disobedient he was. This is not the first time he has run away from home. Did he tell you that?" His eyes flick beyond me again, into the past. I shake my head. "He was ten. We would not buy him a new bicycle. He had an old one that was perfectly serviceable. So he ran away. He spent the night at a friend's house."

"He came home the next day," Duscha said. "On his old bicycle. He had run out of food."

"Kids," I say. "I hope you spanked him."

"I was grounded for a month," says a voice behind me.

28

Upset (Dev)

I so rarely get to surprise Lee that I really enjoy his jump and bristled-out tail a lot more than I should. “What the *hell*?” he says as he turns. “How long have you been there?”

“Oh, a few minutes,” I say, strolling up to him and wrapping my arms around him. Dad kinda looks away. Mom does too, but only after a minute.

He hugs back. He feels thin, or maybe it’s just my imagination after hearing he was in jail. He’s warm and he smells like he slept in his clothes. I don’t ever want to let him go. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I was trying to make things right.”

He says it softly. I’m not sure my parents heard. So I talk just as soft, back into his ear. “From what I heard, you did good.”

He smiles and then steps back from the hug. “How did you get here? You need to play tomorrow.”

“Oh,” I say, tugging at the Firebirds t-shirt I’m wearing, “the Firebirds’ owner, well, he has a private jet and Lake Handerson has an airfield.” I shrug, like it’s no biggie, but Lee smiles and I know he sees what it meant.

“Owner’s private jet.” Dad sounds impressed, reluctantly. “To come see me?”

“To see both of you.” I clasp Lee’s uninjured paw. “To ask you to cut it out. I mean, come on. I need to be able to play football. I can’t do it if I gotta come up here every other week, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Lee says. His tail swings over to brush the back of my legs. I respond with only a quick flick, because my parents are still watching. When I was in high school and thought they couldn’t see my tail twining with that cougar’s, well, I was wrong.

“So, what?” Dad says. “You think this makes it all better? You think I meant none of what I said?” He puts a paw to the bandage on his head, but his expression doesn’t get any less intense.

“Mikhail,” Mom says, quietly but firmly. His ears go back.

“No,” I say. “I want you to change your mind because you understand. Please, Dad.”

He doesn’t want to give in. I can see it. But he does think at least a little differently. Mom starts to say something, but Lee beats her to it. “You know,” he says, “I, uh, can wear a dress. I was in theater in college.”

I cut that off before it has a chance to go anywhere. “No,” I say. “Lee comes home with me or not, but you can’t pretend he’s something else.”

“What pretend?” Dad grumbles. “He told us he is the girl.”

I blink, look down at Lee. “You did?”

“Yesterday,” Dad says. “Before...”

Lee shrugs. “I thought it might make him feel better.” I want to hug him all over again.

“It did not,” Dad says, but the way he says it is dry, a little sarcastic. “What would make me feel better is being left alone in my room to recover.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I was worried, but it sounds like you’re okay.”

“It is nothing.” He rubs the bandage, then drops his paw to his side.

I want to ask how it happened, but I don’t think this is the right time. “So...”

“Perhaps we could have a moment alone with Devlin?” Mom looks at Lee as she says it, with the same velvet she used to address my father.

He nods. “Of course. I’ll just be, uh, outside.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.” I pat the base of his tail long enough to feel it arch against my paw, back where my parents couldn’t see even if they were looking. Which they’re not.

He turns to go, claws clicking on the tiled hospital floor. I turn and watch his confident stride, his tail arched and swinging just a little bit. I want to ask him about his job, about my parents, about his father, who was waiting outside. And I kind of want to see his reaction to the other surprise, the one talking to his father now, but I can’t see them through the doorway. So I’ll have to miss that one.

“Hey,” Dad calls. “Fox. Lee.”

He turns. Dad points to the splint on Lee’s paw, and then taps his bandage. “Even, hah?”

“You got him fired,” I point out.

Lee grins all the way up to his cheekruffs. “And I blabbed to the tabloids.” He looks toward my dad. “Even, sir.”

The door closes behind him. I step closer to my parents. “Okay,” I say. “What. The. Hell.”

“Watch your language,” Dad growls.

“Oh, I am,” I say. I put my paws on my hips. “Are you okay?”

“Is a bump,” he says. “A scratch.”

“You had to start a fight,” I say. “You couldn’t just—”

“He started the fight.” Dad talks loudly over me. “He…touched my shirt.”

“You didn’t have to talk to him at all!”

“Devlin,” Mom says. “Please.”

We stare back and forth. I inhale Dad’s scent, the one I’ve known all my life. But I also smell fox, sharp in my nose, helping me curb the instinctive reaction to drop my muzzle, to give in. My ribs sting a little with each breath, in this tense stance. I bite my tongue to stop myself from feeling that pain.

“No, Mom, I just want to know when this is going to end. I’m not giving up Lee, and I’m not giving up on you guys, so you’re

going to have to live with it. And I really don't want to have to worry that every time I'm not around, my father and my boyfriend," they flinch at the word; I don't care, "might kill each other." Emotion chokes my words. I force it back down my throat.

"Do not be stupid," Dad says.

I hold up two fingers. "So far you've seen Lee twice, and I've ended up going to the hospital both times. So who's stupid?"

He glares. I almost think he's going to come out of the hospital bed at me. My tail curls back around my leg and I feel pressure mounting in my throat again, but I stare back. I think my eyes are starting to water.

His voice is icy. "Is he teaching you to talk back, too?"

I pound my chest with a fist, ignoring the flare of pain from my ribs. "I'm saying what I feel."

"Hmf," he says. "If you had done that in the first place—"

"What?" I wave at the hospital room. "You'd magically be tolerant?"

"Do you know how shameful it is to find out about your son on *television?*" He spits the word at me.

"Mikhail," Mom says.

"I talked to him just that week!" He gestures with a paw.

My anger fades, ears flicking back. "I couldn't..."

"Ivan, he calls me on the phone and he says, 'Hey,' he says, 'so your boy is a faggot, why didn't you tell me?' What do I say to that?"

"You didn't know," I say. "And what the hell business is it of his?"

"What business is it of the whole world? You go on television!"

"Someone was going to expose me."

His eyes widen. "And then we find out this has been going on for years. You could not tell us about this part of your life?"

"I didn't know—you're always talking about 'faggots'—"

"You bring home this fox, you still cannot talk, you let this fox talk for you—"

“You were never around!”

“I know—” He stops, stares past me at the door. “I thought,” he says, calming, “that this fox is no good for you. I thought, you are not like this. I thought…” His voice drops, rasping. “I thought my son has become a stranger to me. This fox has…has taken you. So. I tell him to leave you alone.”

“You threatened him!”

He points at his head. “He put me in the hospital!”

“Not that time—”

He talks over me, interrupting with a ‘hruff.’ “I…did not think he would fight back. Did not think he was the type.”

I stare. He doesn’t meet my eyes. “I don’t want either of you to fight,” I say.

Mom smiles. Without looking at her, Dad says, “Your mother and I have been talking.” His eyes flick down, and then his ears fold back. The words come haltingly, like a runner smashing into tacklers, pushing through them. “There will be…no more fighting.”

His face is in shadow, but the reflected light of the sun on his sheets makes his eyes shine. I watch them until they rise and meet mine. “Wait,” I say. “So Lee puts you in the hospital, and now…”

“It disturbs your mother,” Dad says.

Mom smiles. Her tail sways near the floor, not touching it, even in the clean hospital. She doesn’t say anything, though. She doesn’t have to. The tension leaves me in a great wave, so that I almost have to brace myself on the bed. But I stand upright on my own, take a deep breath to let the emotion in my throat subside, and say, “Thanks.”

“Devlin,” Dad says. “I would like for you to call me this week. After your game. I would like to hear about your life. All of it.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure. Like Lee said.” A new emotion threatens to choke off my words. “He’s pretty smart, huh?”

Mom gives me a smile and a slight nod. Dad sighs. “He is…not what I had imagined.”

That’s enough for now. “We’ll be in Port City…” I trail off,

realizing that has nothing to do with anything. “I’ll call.”

I don’t trust myself to say any more words. Dad waves a paw. “I am a little tired.”

“Yeah. I’d better go see Lee.” I say it quietly. Mom smiles, a little. “Glad you’re okay.”

“It’s good to see you,” Mom stands to give me a hug.

I look at Dad, standing beside his bed. He extends a paw.

His grip is as firm as I remember it, as firm as it ever was. I squeeze back just as firmly.

“Play hard tomorrow,” he says as he releases my paw.

“Always.” I look down at his muzzle. His expression is distant. “I’ll send you playoff tickets.”

That gets a grin out of him, a fierce, startled grin. As quickly as it appears, it’s gone, and he just nods. “We will see if I can arrange work schedules.”

“I’m sure Ivan will take the tickets…”

“Pah,” he says. “Ivan knows nothing about football.”

I turn. The tile is cool under my paws. I’m halfway to the door when Mom says, “Devlin.”

I pause, staring at the door and the window to the hall outside. Dad says, “Duscha, now is not the time.”

“Hush,” she says. Then, to me, “Do you want regular stuffing, or cornbread?”

The warmth of the room makes the door in front of me blur. My throat closes up. I wait, lifting a paw to rub my eyes, until it opens again. “Can we have both?”

Her voice is soft and warm. “Perhaps this would be a good year to do that. Yes. I think so.”

“Thanks, Mom.” My voice cracks. I turn the handle of the door and step out.

29

Upcoming Schedule (Lee)

Out in the hallway, two people I expect to be there are gone, and one person I don't expect is there. Vogt and the police chief are nowhere to be seen. I might miss the wolverine behind a crowd of blue-gowned nurses, but Vogt would tower above them all. My father is on a bench, facing me, talking to a dusky-furred fox with tall brown ears, wearing an open flannel shirt and dirty khaki slacks. Distracted by the conversation I've just had, I catch his scent but don't identify him.

My father looks up. "How did it go?"

"Um." I run my paw through my head fur, flattening my ears and letting them spring back up. "Not...not bad. Surprisingly not bad. I might've done something right, for once."

The other fox turns and gives me a wide grin. For a second, I still don't recognize him, because he's so wildly out of place that my brain doesn't even process who it is. "Hi," I say, and then, "what the fuck?"

A blue-gowned ermine gives me a severe look and wanders on down the hall. Hal Kinnel gets up and extends his paw. "When you said you were gonna give me an endin' to the story," he says, "I didn't think you were gonna go all dramatic on me."

"How..." I shake his paw. "What the he-eck are you doing here?"

"Wahl," he drawls, "I kinda know Corcoran—Firebirds' owner

—”

“I know,” I say.

“I was just tellin’ your dad. So when I got your voicemail an’ did a little snoopin’, I found out what you got put in jail for. Called Corcoran and told him what kinda shit was goin’ down.” A red fox in a blue gown, walking by, makes a tutting noise at Hal’s language. Hal ignores him. “He’s a big family guy. All I hadda say was that one of his players had a father in the hospital. He was on his other phone gettin’ the plane ready before I even hung up. Didn’t even have to tell him who it was or talk him into a damn thing.”

He seems disappointed. I glance at my father’s grin, then back at Hal. “You ‘did a little snooping.’”

“Ain’t so bad a reporter, I guess.” He lifts his muzzle, smug.

I incline my head. “So Corcoran called Dev—”

“We-ell, actually, I b’lieve Coach Samuelson did.”

“And you got to go along.”

He spreads his paws, eyes wide. “The jet was in Chevali. Had to take off from there anyway. Costs him the same if it took a passenger or not. Seein’ as how I was right outside th’airfield anyway, he was pretty agreeable.” He winks. “Got there at midnight but they couldn’t take off ’til four, so I just slept in the car.”

“You know him that well?” my father says.

“Oh,” I say, “they’re not drinking buddies or anything. But you remember a few years ago when the Firebirds had to dump a lot of contracts?”

“No.” My father shakes his head, but Hal’s ears are up and he’s grinning at me.

“Right around that time, there was a nice long piece on the Chevali front office. Nice profiles of the owner, the general manager, and the chief financial officer. Who was the owner’s son-in-law.”

“Jennie Corcoran ain’t the brightest when it comes to pickin’

guys," Hal says. "First husband stole her car and a fifty-thousand-dollar gold watch."

"And her second husband isn't CFO any more," I say. "He's managing one of Corcoran's furniture stores. Pretty big drop."

"People settle to their level," Hal says. He grins. "Y'ain't so bad a reporter y'self."

"So I figure," I say, "you know more about why Corcoran's son-in-law was dismissed than showed up in that article."

"That first husband was a lot of bad publicity," Hal says. "Corky figured folks didn't need to know about another stupid kid his daughter married makin' a mistake, long as he handled it privately."

"Keeping family business private." I cough.

Hal flicks his ears, and grins. "I knew it'd come in handy someday. Even if not ever'one agreed with me at the time."

My father raises his eyebrows. "So you called in that marker for this story."

Hal waves a paw. "Don't go thinkin' I like your son or nothin'. This is my story, and if it's wrappin' up here, I should be around in person. Much better'n second-hand accounts." He raises an eyebrow at me. "If I'm 'lowed to write it."

Father looks at me, too. "I'll need to ask Dev," I say, "but I don't really know how we can say no, now." I'd have to disclose before I got a new job, anyway.

"Good," he says, "cause I was on the phone with my bud at the Herald just now, and he'd like to run it."

"Good for your bank account." It occurs to me, then, who he means when he says 'not ever'one agreed' with him. "And I bet that'll show Cimarine, huh?"

His ears perk even further up than I would've thought possible. "That's the gen'ral idea. Course, happy endin's sell better." He sniffs in my direction.

I glance toward the closed door. "We'll see how the ending comes out."

Father breaks in. “You sounded optimistic.”

That relaxes Hal. He nods to Father. “We been talkin’, too. How come you didn’t tell me ’bout your mom when you told me about the tiger family there, huh?”

Father looks a little pained, but gives me a nod. I move as a nurse carrying a tray of cups comes down the hall. “Don’t know. Didn’t seem relevant.”

“That’s why you’re not a reporter.” There’s his smug smile again. “I can start writin’ this on the way back. Long as I can get a quick quote from Miski, senior.”

“Don’t know how much he’s going to want to talk to you. He’s pretty private.”

Kinnel taps the side of his nose. “You leave that to me.”

He looks confident and happy, his tail has an arch to it, and he’s even got a light designer fragrance on. If this were the first time I’d seen him after the press conference where we met, I’m not sure I’d recognize him. It’s nice to think that I gave him this chance, that opening myself up to someone helped him get back on track. I can almost forgive him for the tabloid article. Which was my fault, anyway.

Both our ears perk at the sound of shouting from inside the room, but I can’t distinguish words or even whose voice it is. I assume he can’t either. After that one outburst, it subsides. We look at each other. “Until I hear the crash of furniture, I’ll assume it’s okay,” I say.

“You know best,” he says. He asks me and my father about my childhood and college years, how they handled my coming out. My father does most of the talking, while I stare at the door, trying to imagine what’s going on inside. Once Dev’s over the relief of me being okay, once his father tells him what happened...are we going to have another fight? A bigger one, this time?

Hal and my father are talking about some news scandal when the door to Mikhail’s room opens, and the conversation dies away. I can’t read Dev’s expression as he steps out and then eases the

door shut behind him. He stands, staring at the door for a second, then turns and sees us in the hallway. Behind me, a patient room is open, empty and sterile. Dev walks past Hal in two steps, takes my shoulder, and says, “In here. Now.”

Hal raises his eyebrows. I fold my ears down and say, “I’ll be right back.” Dev’s expression is unreadable, his tail flicking at the tip, his scent confused. I follow him into the room with no idea what to expect.

He kicks the door closed. The room is bright, the window open, but he’s standing in front of it and I can only see the reflection of the white wall in his eyes. I move to one side to get a better view; I only get a glimpse of my own sunlit face reflected in his shiny golden eyes before his paws snap out with frightening speed and hold my shoulders.

“I’m not trying to get away,” I say.

“I know.” The words are hard, tough.

He doesn’t follow up. I say, tentatively, “So…is it okay?”

He gives his head a quick shake, not a negation, but more like he’s trying to clear it, or shake something loose. “You beat up my dad.”

I flush. My ears, warm, fold down, and I dip my muzzle. I stare at his toes, orange and white, dirty and real against the tile. “I, uh, really I just…” My tail curls down between my legs.

He squeezes my shoulders. “You. Beat up. My. Dad.”

I stare up at him and try a smile. “Yeah, well, he called me a girl…” I break off, because he has a strange look on his face, like if I’d grown a second tail or something. “What?”

He shakes his head again. “You. Are you ever going to stop surprising me?”

His paws are trembling. I lift mine to hold his wrists and meet his eyes. “I don’t plan on it.” He starts to say something, but I cut him off. “But I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

He makes a strangled half-laugh and then crushes me against his chest, pressing his nose between my ears. His breath is hot and

moist and wonderful. I wrap my arms around him and push my nose into his chest, his Firebirds t-shirt soft over the hard muscle. I inhale, the happy and scared and angry and tigery musk filling my world. I close my eyes to shut out everything else.

"You're a crazy fox," he murmurs, and washes down the fur between my ears with a warm tongue.

I start to reply, but he cups my cheek ruffs and stares down at me, his nose an inch from mine. "You're crazy, and wonderful, and precious, and you are not allowed to go anywhere, because I don't know what the hell I would do without you, and I don't want to find out."

"Okay," I say, but I really only get the first part of it out before our lips are touching, and then our tongues, and then I can't see his eyes anymore. I'm lost in the little shivers in my body, in his, our tails swaying together. The world stops turning for a moment to let us hang there and just be, together. And the knowledge that everything is going to be all right is mine again, a warm, orange and black-striped promise to my heart.

Time starts again. Reluctantly, we slide apart, though only physically, and he keeps his arms around me. "So," I say, "you're okay with your dad?"

He rumbles, softly. "I guess you impressed him."

"With my ah-key-dough?"

He doesn't laugh. "Coming up to see him. All that stuff you said about talking to each other, about who I am and used to be and..." He lowers his muzzle. "Where did that come from?"

I brush my whiskers against his. "I finally listened to what he was really yelling about. I remembered our fights, how things work out when we just listen." I grin. "Also, I was desperate. I thought telling him you were the top would work and it totally didn't. I needed to try *something*."

His eyes flick toward me. "Did you really tell him that I fuck you?"

"Yeah, well." I flick my ears. "He's family, y'know. I thought

it'd be important to him."

"Oh, yeah? Did you tell *your* father?"

I hiss. "Shh. He's right outside. You want him to find out I'm gay?"

Sunlight sparkles in his eyes. "Yeah."

"Fine. I'll tell him at Thanksgiving," I say. "'Hey, Father, pass the potatoes to the bottom fox.'"

There, he gives me a little laugh. "Oh...I think I'm going back for Thanksgiving. Home." He smiles at my wide eyes. "And I think I can get you there, too."

"Really?" I flick my ears up, and play-snarl. "If I'd known that was all it took, I'd have beaten up your dad first thing."

"No more fighting." He glares down.

"Hey," I say, "I told you a long time ago that I could take care of myself."

It takes a second. Then his sides start to shake, his arms squeeze more tightly, and he staggers to one side, laughing, dragging me with him against the wall. I protest theatrically but fall against him as he leans, back to the wall, muzzle pointed to the ceiling, stomach still shaking with giggles. "Yes," he gasps, "you did."

I poke him, giggling a little myself. "You should listen to me."

He calms a bit and wipes his eyes, holding on to me with the other paw. Now his eyes are the ones lit up by the sunlight, dazzling gold. "Yes, I should," he says, and cups his ears forward. "All right, then, what do we do now?"

"Oh, you know my usual answer to that."

He chuckles, dropping a paw to my rear. It's warm, affectionate. Nothing else. "Doesn't feel like either of us is in the mood right now."

"I know," I say. "And in a room with an empty bed. What's wrong with us?"

"Not the right place," he rumbles down to me.

"Not the right time." I take a breath, look up. "Want to ride back with us to Hilltown? Unless you're supposed to take the

private jet back, or something."

He scratches his whiskers, and pulls his phone out to look at the time. "Ten-thirty. The pilot said if we're back by quarter after eleven, I'd make it to afternoon practice. I just gotta be sure everything's settled here."

I cup my ears toward him. "'We,' like, you and Hal, right?"

"Hal?" He raises his eyebrows.

"The reporter," I clarify. "The swift fox. Come on, you flew up here with him."

Dev stands straight and pulls my hips against him. "I was kinda hoping I could talk you into comin' down to Hellentown. I know you said no, but y'know..." He lowers his muzzle to one of my ears. "I'm more persuasive face to face, too."

"I've...rrf...heard that about you." I can't stop my tail from wagging as he mouths my ear.

"Besides," he growls, "I don't think I can leave you and my dad alone. I'm tired of this fucking hospital."

"I promised not to fight any more."

"So did he." He sighs and shakes his head. "But I want you to come with me anyway."

I hide my happiness at his father's promise, except for a wag to my tail. "Do you think my father could come along too, maybe?"

At that, he lets my ear go to meet my eyes. I know he's thinking about my mother. I am, too. But he reads me as well as I read him, and knows this isn't the time to bring her up. So he smiles. "Hmm. Maybe. You want him to come along?"

"Yeah." I don't really have to think about it much. "Kinda."

"Even if he finds out you're gay?"

"Well, I mean. He did come all the way up here to bail me out of jail."

"Oh, yeah, I want to hear all about jail. You weren't in there with some big punk tiger who wanted you to be his bitch, were you?"

"No, that's who I'm in here with," I say.

He giggles again and bites my ear. “Damn right.”

“Come on, I got enough scars from your family,” I say, squirming.

He knows me too well to think I’m really objecting, but he lets go anyway, letting me flick the damp ear around against his muzzle. “All right. Let’s grab the others and go.”

He starts to let me go, but I hold on to him. “Hey.” He raises his eyebrows. I push my nose up to his, standing on tiptoe to give him a fierce glare. “You’re not allowed to go nowhere, either.”

“Oh, foxy,” he says, and hugs me. “Not even to the playoffs?”

I squeeze him as best I can with my flimsy fox muscles. I guess not that flimsy. I did beat up his dad, after all. “Not unless I come with ya.”

“That mean you’re gonna come live in Chevali?”

I hesitate. Right now I don’t want to be apart from him ever again. But as nice as this moment is, it can’t last forever. “You know,” he presses, “just because you can take care of yourself doesn’t mean you always have to. I like taking care of you once in a while, too.”

“My winter coat’s already coming in.”

“I’ll brush it out.”

“My apartment is—”

“I’ll pay for it.”

I kiss his nose, and then lower, and that turns into another world-stopping moment, the two of us locked together with the rest of the world locked out. When I can talk again, I do. “I’ll need a week to pack.”

He perks up like a little cub. “Really?”

“Yeah. You are more persuasive in person.” He laughs and hugs me. “Just for the season,” I say, “and I’m gonna call around about jobs.”

“Sure, sure.” He nods, but his tail is lashing happily, and hell, mine’s wagging pretty hard too. “Now can we go outside?”

Hal’s alone in the hallway. His ears perk up as we walk out, and

he jerks a thumb toward Mickey's door, in response to my unasked question. "Your dad went in."

"In...there? Why?"

He shrugs. "Said he didn't know when he'd get to meet his son's boyfriend's parents again."

"How long's he been in there?" Dev, behind me, speaks up.

"Not quite as long as you two been in there." He eyes us both and pulls his notebook out. "You got things sorted out?"

"I think so." Dev's large paw pulls me back against him by my shoulder.

I curl my tail back around his legs and ask Kinnel, "Did you get your quote?"

He flips the notebook to a blank page. "Yeah, but I don't know if I can use 'Get out.' So how'd you land him in the hospital? Police report just said it was a 'fight.'"

"Oh, I know aikido," I say, and glance up at Dev. "But it was nothing, really. I mean..."

Kinnel snorts, at the same time as Dev squeezes my shoulder. "S'okay," my tiger says. "I think it's better to say that you used martial arts than to say he just fell."

"Yeah." The swift fox's ears flick up and back as he jots down some notes. "Aikido, huh? Took that myself back in college. Never thought it'd be any good at all. Sure's hell wouldn't bet my hide on it in a fight against a tiger twice my size. Damn fool idea."

I lean back against Dev. "It seems to have worked out okay." I curl my tail back around his leg. One of the nurses frowns, looking at us as he walks by, but I don't give a damn.

Dev's grip tightens on me. His tail brushes the back of my leg. "Yeah," he says, his voice husky. "Pretty okay."

"Lucky," the swift fox says.

"I used to think that." Dev nuzzles between my ears briefly. "But after he gets lucky a bunch of times—"

"Ahem," I say.

"—you have to—what? Oh." He snorts against my ears. "I

didn't mean it like that. Jeez." Kinnel's smirking too, scribbling on his notepad. "I mean, after a bunch of times, you can't really say it's luck anymore, can you? It's gotta be him."

I duck my head, pretending to brush something out of my face to cover up the emotion that I'm sure Kinnel could see if I let him, and will likely be able to catch in my scent if Dev keeps this up.

The swift fox has paused when I look up, his pen idle on the pad. He's not smirking, looking at us. "I think maybe you're both lucky," he says.

I want to say something, but I don't trust my voice. I nod. Dev says, "Yeah," and I turn my head and nuzzle his paw.

"So did they take you back?" Kinnel's looking up at Dev now.

I feel Dev's nod, and then the door opens and my father walks out with Duscha behind him. "Mik wants something to drink," she says. "I was just going to go down to the cafeteria." She looks around at all of us, as though we had stopped her. "Thank you all for coming," she says finally.

"I didn't—" I break off the rest of the sentence, which was going to be 'really have a choice,' and reconsider my words. This might be one of those times when I don't have to be sarcastic. "Mean for this to happen," I finish.

She steps forward. She's not quite as tall as her husband, but she's still taller than me. I feel rather trapped here between the two tigers. Then I look to my left, where my father, who's my height, is leaning against the wall. He smiles and turns his head, flicking his eyes up. I know he gets what I'm feeling. So I smile up at Duscha as she looks down and says, "I know you meant well. I know you care about Devlin."

"Uh, Mom, we need to get going. I have to get back for practice." Dev speaks over my head.

I nudge backwards. "Aw, you can let your mom talk," I say.

"We really have to get going." He growls softly, but his tail curls around mine.

Duscha extends her paw to me. "I hope to see you again," she

says, clipping off a word that might have been ‘soon.’

“Same here.” I grasp and shake it. “But I understand if it takes a while.”

Unexpectedly, she smiles. “Mik is stubborn. But so are you. Both. I will walk downstairs with you.”

My father joins us, two short foxes under two tall tigers walking toward the elevator, with Kinnel the swift fox chaperoning. We all crowd into the elevator, which lets me press back against Dev semi-discreetly until we get to the ground floor. His tail curls around mine all the way down.

There’s something about hospitals, a kind of desperation that disposes one kindly toward whomever you happen to be with, at least when out in the public areas. We step into the waiting room and meet the gaze of a polar bear whose white fur is stained with blood. He watches us leave with tired, envious eyes. Next to him, a pine marten with crusty, yellowed eyes scratches at his patchy fur; across from him, a female wolverine tries in vain to stop her two babies from screeching. We all hang together, looking around, thinking, *I’m glad that’s not me*. Dev reaches for my paw and squeezes it. I squeeze back.

At the exit, Duscha steps away to go to the cafeteria. Dev leans over me to kiss her muzzle. “Bye, Mom.”

She reaches up. “I love you, Devlin.”

“Uh, me too,” he says.

I step out from between them. “Oh, don’t let me get in the way,” I say, moving toward my father.

Dev and his mother hesitate, and then hug. “So,” I ask in my quietest voice, aware that Kinnel is right beside us and can also hear, “what did you talk to Mickey about?”

“Oh,” he says, “I just said I wanted to meet him. He asked if you were as much a disappointment as his son was. I said much more. I mean, you don’t even have a job now.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“Then I said that maybe neither of you was living the life we’d

chosen for you, but you were both pretty fine people."

"*Ma-e*," Kinnel says, quietly.

"That took twenty minutes?"

Father smiles and adjusts his glasses. "After that we got distracted talking football. He thinks the Firebirds can win it all."

"He's a little biased." I grin at Dev, who's waving good-bye as his mother walks away. I think again about my own mother. I don't think that what's going on with her would be solved by Dev going to talk to her, confronting her as I did with his father. I want to ask my father whether he told her where he is today, but I already know the answer. And that is not, I think, about me—at least, not completely. There's a conversation coming, not too far off.

There's a lot coming. Thanksgiving, of course, but a host of smaller conversations to be had with his family and mine. There's Dev's team, his football career, my football career. Life, basically. I feel more ready for it now than I was a month ago, or hell, even a day ago.

We walk outside into the bright sun, the four of us, across to a waiting taxi. Kinnel asks my father a football question, walking in front. They don't notice when Dev pauses, staring back at the hospital behind us.

I stop with him, just standing next to him on the snow-covered lawn, breathing in the fresh, sweet air. The sun's at our backs, warm even in the chill November morning. I wait, but he doesn't say anything, and finally I say, "What?"

He's panting, just a little, as if he's been doing his workout already. He puts an arm around my shoulder, his paw strong and sure, pulling me close. I fit nicely there, against his side. A smile as bright as the sun grows on his muzzle as he looks down at me. "Sweet Lion Jesus, I'm glad that's over."

My tail swings over to hang next to his. His scent fills my nostrils as I smile up into his beautiful golden eyes, with the blue sky beyond. "Over?" I reach up to grasp his paw. "Tiger, it's only

just beginning.”

About the Author and Artist

Kyell Gold took up furry erotica writing after high school, making the team at his small liberal arts college as a walk-on. He was drafted late by Sofawolf and blossomed in the professional league, earning twelve Ursa Major awards in seven years for his novels and short stories. His novel “Out of Position” won the Rainbow Award for Best Gay Novel of 2009, and he has won one Coyotl Award and been nominated four times. His novel "Green Fairy" was nominated for inclusion in the ALA's "Over the Rainbow" list for 2012.

He was not born in California, but now considers it his home. He loves to travel and dine out with his husband Kit Silver, and can be seen at furry conventions around the world. More information about him and his books is available at http://www.kyellgold.com.

Blotch was one of the top-rated high school furry artist prospects of 2006 and starred in college before being made the #1 pick of Sofawolf. He’s excelled in his first two years, garnering several convention GOH appearances and a 2007 Ursa Major award for his FAU Souvenir Book cover. In 2008, his full-color graphic novel *Dog’s Days of Summer* was released to wide acclaim, and in 2010, his comic *Nordguard: Across Thin Ice* was nominated for the Russ Manning Award for Most Promising New Talent.

Blotch is a joint project of **Teagan Gavet** and **Tess Garman**. Their art can be found at http://teagangavet.tumblr.com and http://tessgarman.tumblr.com, respectively.

Also by Kyell Gold

For more information about Kyell Gold's books, please visit his website: http://www.kyellgold.com/books.html. If you would like to get monthly updates on upcoming publications, excerpts of works in progress, and writing tips, sign up for his mailing list (your e-mail address will not be sold or used for anything else).

Out of Position (Dev and Lee)

Out of Position – Dev the football player and Lee the gay activist discover how to navigate their relationship.

Isolation Play – The continuing story of Dev and Lee, as they contend with family and friends in their search for acceptance.

Divisions – As Dev's team fights to make the playoffs, Lee fights to keep his sense of self.

Uncovered – The playoffs are here, and Dev needs his focus more than ever. So when Lee becomes too distracting, something has to give.

Over Time (2016) – Dev and Lee try to plan their future while dealing with crises all around them.

Dangerous Spirits

Green Fairy – A gay high school senior struggling through his final year finds a strange old book that changes his dreams and his life.

Red Devil – A gay fox who fled his abusive family in Siberia seeks help from a ghost who demands he give up his gay lifestyle.

Black Angel (2016) – A young otter struggles to understand her sexuality as her friends prepare for post-high school life and dreams of women in other times plague her.

Argaea

Volle – The story of how Volle came to Tephos, a spy masquerading as a noble, and the first adventure he had there.

The Prisoner's Release and Other Stories – The story of how Volle escaped from prison, and the story of what happened after, plus two other stories following characters from "Volle."

Pendant of Fortune – Volle returns to Tephos to defend his honor, but soon finds himself fighting for much more.

Shadow of the Father – Volle's son, Yilon, must travel to the far-off land he is meant to rule, but he will have to fight treachery to take the lordship.

Weasel Presents – Five short stories from the land of Argaea, including "Helfer's Busy Day" and "Yilon's Journal."

Forester Universe

Waterways – The full story of Kory's journey to understand himself and what it means to be gay.

Bridges – Hayward seems content to set up pairs of his friends. But what does he really need for himself?

Science Friction – Vaxy never took sex seriously, until he found out the professor he was sleeping with was married…

Winter Games – Sierra Snowpaw was an unsure high school student when someone he thought was a friend changed his life. Now he's fifteen years older and still looking for answers.

The Mysterious Affair of Giles – A servant in a British manor house tries to solve a murder.

Dude, Where's My Fox? – Lonnie chases down a fox he hooked up with at a party as a way to get over his breakup.

Losing My Religion – On tour with his R.E.M. cover band, Jackson mentors the new guy in the band as his own life falls apart.

Other Books

The Silver Circle – Valerie thought the old hunter was crazy when he warned her about werewolves—until she met one.

In the Doghouse of Justice – Seven stories of superheroes and their not-so-super relationships.

Preview: Divisions (Book 3)

The third book in the Out of Position series follows our heroes through the stress of the holidays as more family drama and football drama complicates their lives…

Divisions Chapter 1: Fracture (Lee)

From the other side of the menu, Father says, “I filed for divorce.”

I lower the laminated page slowly. He looks gravely over the tops of his glasses at me, his paws resting on his own face-down menu. His ears are flat, but not down. “I asked if you want wine,” I say.

He nods. “Yesterday. I thought you should know.”

“So,” I say. “That’s a ‘yes.’”

This has been coming for a while. A month or so ago, Father told me he and Mother weren’t spending so much time together any more. She has new friends, a Mrs. Hedley and a poisonous anti-gay religious group called Families United. Mother was never a churchgoer, but she is a crusader. My aunt Carolyn has told me enough about their strict upbringing that if I look at her as a fictional character in an Edith Wharton novel, church sort of fits, if not hateful propaganda.

But I still want to know how they got to this point. Did he suggest it? Did she? I think it makes a difference. But I’m not quite sure how to ask that, so I keep quiet and flick my ears to the bland Christmas music, looking around the big dining room.

I’m spending Thanksgiving afternoon in a country club a few hours north of Hilltown, about midway between where my parents live and where I live until Saturday. Thanksgiving dinner is just me and my father instead of with both parents, instead of with my

boyfriend, who is at his own family's place thirty minutes away in the small town of Lake Handerson. Father and I are going over there for leftovers tomorrow, not dinner tonight, but even though my activist brain reflexively yells at being shuffled to the side, really, it's fine with me. It's an enormous leap forward just to be invited there around a holiday, and it's hard enough for me to handle three tigers when just his parents are home. I don't need to confront ten.

Now, though, that would seem like a relief. I wouldn't have thought that the word "divorce" would hit me as hard as it has, but I can't focus on the menu at all. Fortunately, the Thanksgiving menu is much less about choice and more about what you're going to get, like it or not. When the waiter comes, I just say "two" to whatever my father orders.

Then the menus are gone, and I can't escape his gaze. "Nothing really changes for you," he says.

Nothing? I flare my nostrils, taking in the scent of fifty-year-old people and decorations under the bland kitchen smells of a Thanksgiving cooked to appeal to every species, rather than some of our fox-specific dishes. There's no sweet scent in the air from Mother's raspberry sauce, just the barely-sour cranberry. There'll be nothing crunchy in the stuffing, I'm sure; I've had bland stuffing before. It's not that the food won't be good. It just won't be what I'm used to.

When I look back at Father, ending my exaggerated sniff, he takes my meaning. "Holidays aren't about where we have them. They're about being together. So we come here instead of going home."

"Where's home?" I say, as he reaches for his drink.

The glass of water was halfway to the end of his muzzle. He lowers it and takes his glasses off, rubbing them on his napkin. "There's an apartment building close to work. I signed a lease yesterday. Anyway, you have your own home now."

The warmth of that remark doesn't stop my tail from curling

under the chair. “You know, they always tell us gay boys not to come out to the families at dinner. Don’t you have like a troubled marriage forum that tells you not to announce a divorce at Thanksgiving?”

“It seemed more logical than going through the holiday with it hanging over our heads.” He replaces the glasses and drinks the water. “This isn’t easy for me.”

“No, I know.” The tablecloth’s fabric is rough under my paw pads, bunching as I rub it. My whiskers twitch as someone walks behind me: a mouse, from the scent. I look around at the other tables, seeking a distraction. “Hey, you think that whole family there just didn’t feel like cooking? Or are they having their kitchen redone?”

“Wiley, I don’t want you to look at this as something that’s about you.”

My ears fold down. “Well, I *hadn’t* been.”

He leans forward, with his elbows on the table. “When your mother and I met, we were both ambitious. She wanted to get away from her family, I wanted to go somewhere different. For a while, we were pretty happy. But we…sometimes when people think they want the same thing, it’s only because you can’t see how different the things you want really are.”

“Did you read that in ‘Chicken Soup for the Estranged Soul’?” I snap my mouth shut. “Sorry. It just sounds like…” Like someone else talking out of my father’s mouth. “Like one of those things that doesn’t mean anything. What about ‘Sometimes the things you want change’?”

“That too.” He taps the side of his muzzle. “How’s your football player? Devlin?”

“He’s with his family.” I say it without intending the comparison, but of course we both make it, and both cringe in different ways. “They’ve got the whole clan together.”

“So you’re not going to meet the extended family?”

“God, no.” I laugh. “Even his brother didn’t want to meet me.

His parents were the ones who insisted."

"Sounds like Mikhail, what little I know of him. How's he doing?"

"Fine," I say. "I don't bring up the head wound."

"You talk to him that much?"

"Well." I look down. "No. But I don't bring it up, when I do."

Apart from getting to see Dev again—funny how we'd spend weeks apart, and now that I'm going to be living at his place, two days seems like forever—that's what is most on my mind about tomorrow's dinner. Mikhail ostensibly forgave me at the hospital, and Dev says he hasn't said anything bad about me, but that just makes me think that he probably hasn't said anything about me, period. But then, they did insist I come meet his brother. Maybe Mikhail is hoping Gregory can beat me up.

I'd hoped this dinner would be relaxing preparation for that meeting. Instead I'm trying not to think about my parents' marriage ending, which of course means that's all I can think about.

At least I'm distracting Father, if not myself. The corners of his mouth curve up. "That was one of the more surreal days of my life."

"Look at it this way," I say. "How many people can say they met their son's boyfriend's parents in the hospital after their son won a fight?"

"Oh, it's 'won' now, is it?" He raises an eyebrow.

"I didn't *lose*," I say. "And he ended up in the hospital. So."

The waiter brings our glasses of white wine, stalling the conversation. It's a good wine, but nothing special; about right for a country club full of middle-aged midwesterners. I barely taste it anyway.

"How are you doing?" I ask, unguardedly as I can allow myself.

He looks off to the side. "Change," he says finally, "even when it's only a change in the label you give something…it's still a change. It'll take some getting used to. I remember." He sips the

wine. “I remember when we were first married, how strange it was to be called ‘husband,’ and ‘wife.’ How we laughed about it.”

Even the activist in me knows this isn’t the time to bring up gay marriage issues. I keep my mouth shut and nod. Now he’s an ex-husband, a divorcé, single—a lot of labels that are new, or that haven’t been applied in twenty-some years. And I have to learn to get to know him this way, too.

I had friends in high school and college who had three or four parents. Heck, Misha had six: an adoptive mother and father, a biological mother and step-father, and a biological father and step-mother. Through grade school and middle school, I’d been proud of having only two parents. By college, I’d come to view it as a curiosity, a relic, almost.

“Have you told anyone else? Aunt Carolyn didn’t mention anything.”

He shakes his head. “You had to be first. We both agreed on that. We didn’t want you to hear it from anyone else. Of course, it is Thanksgiving. So I suspect it’ll make the rounds of the family by tonight. Tomorrow at the latest.”

That makes it sound like it was a mutual thing, but of course someone had to be first to suggest it. It was nice of Mother to agree, though. I imagine her saying that she doesn’t think I would care one way or another, with that hurt tone that lurked behind her words every time she asked if I’d met a vixen in college, knowing what my answer would be. As if being gay were something I’d done to offend her. But divorce—that seems like a big step, and I see what Father means when he says it’s not all about me. There has to be other stuff going on. Still, I can’t help but feel that I’m a big part of it.

Even if the last time I talked to her was months ago, the image of Mother in my head telling Father she doesn’t want to be with him is hard to summon up. It just doesn’t work, somehow. They’ve always been together, unified even in their disapproval of me, up until…well, until I started dating Dev. Father talked more to me

then, saw what I was going through and sympathized. I barely talked to Mother through all of the stuff with Dev's family over the last couple months. I'm not even sure she knows about it.

"I appreciate you telling me first," I say finally. "I'd hate to get a call from grandma telling me you were breaking up."

"She wouldn't call you," Father says.

"I know."

It's hard to make small talk with that leaden capital "D" dragging down the conversation, but I figure the best way to deal with it is to acknowledge it and move on. I don't know if it'd be proper to flaunt my relationship in his face, so I don't talk about moving in with Dev, although preparing for that has occupied most of the last month of my life. "There's this guy Emmanuel at Yerba, and Morty—my old boss, at the Dragons—gave me a good recommendation. He says they might have an opening and Emmanuel wants to talk to me."

"Sounds promising."

"I think so. I mean, I didn't play football, and that's a strike against me. But that whole thing about me and Dev came out now."

"I saw it."

"So Morty thinks that might work in my favor. Yerba, well, you know." I made him and Mother watch the Yerba Pride Parade when I was home one summer. Rather, I turned it on and watched, and Father stayed for some of it. Mother didn't. The next year, my at-the-time best friend Brian and I watched it at the FLAG (Forester U. Lesbians and Gays) club and swore we would go the following summer. But things…didn't work out that way.

He nods. "Why didn't you go to college there?"

I swirl my wine, staring at the patterns of the light on the surface. "After high school? I couldn't have. I knew I was gay, but I didn't know if I would like other gay people. Yerba might as well have been Oz. At Forester, I was close to home, so I had a safety net. Or something."

A smile touches his lips. There are a lot of things he could say there, to be honest, but he doesn't say any of them. Instead, he takes another sip of wine and asks, "So you're just going to wait for the end of the season?"

It feels like an indictment. My "yes" is hesitant and weak, so I follow it up. "Dev's got money, of course, and I'll…I guess I'll keep doing work, watching the games, breaking down players. The guys at Yerba aren't going to tell me what to look for, but I'll watch their players particularly. I'll try to figure out their weaknesses, and then see what players elsewhere might match them. College, too. Just…whatever I can do."

What I don't tell him is the other thing that's been nagging at my mind, that Brian called me when the article my reporter friend Hal wrote about me was published. It was just a profile, went into our relationship a little, but Brian's voicemail made it sound momentous. "Good to see the closet door open," he said, because when I'd been working for the Dragons, I'd had to keep my relationship with Dev a secret. And then he said, "I'm getting back into activism. If you remember what that's like, give me a call." The lure of activism wasn't strong when I was scouting, my life consumed with football and Dev, but with day after idle day stretching out in front of me, I've been thinking a lot about how I'm going to spend my time, and those words keep coming back. Brian always knew how to get under my fur that way. Not that I'd call *him*, but I feel like I want to call someone.

"Still going to travel?"

My father breaks my reverie. I shake my head. "Not to the college games. No point in going if it's not for business. There's a bowl game in Chevali, so maybe I'll go to that one."

"When do you head down there?"

"I'll head down after we leave Dev's place," I say. "Dev has to fly back Friday afternoon for practice, so I'll see him off and then hit the road. He plays Monday and I'll be moved in by Tuesday. I hope."

“Good luck.” He sits back as the waiter brings the first course, a butternut squash soup that smells thickly of sage. It’s only a few leaves, but for canids, a little goes a long way.

“I saw Aunt Carolyn last week,” I say. She’s Mother’s sister, but actually talks more to Father. She didn’t think much of Mother’s attitude toward me; I can only imagine what she’s thinking now.

My father picks sage leaves out of his soup delicately and places them to the side of his plate. “You mentioned. She doing well?”

“She’s seeing some wolf from the gym down the street. I told her if he’s under twenty-five, she’s officially considered a cradle-robber.”

“And?” He takes a spoonful of the soup, blows on it, sniffs it, and holds it.

“She laughed and wouldn’t answer.” I do the same with mine. It smells okay. I test it with my tongue. Squash seems fresh, anyway.

Father smiles and tips the spoon to his muzzle. “Long as she’s happy.”

Right. Relationships: not a great topic. “Um, and Dev won his game.”

“I saw.” He starts in on the soup now.

“He didn’t do much. Not like the Hellentown game. But he didn’t need to. Port City is terrible this year, even with Lightning Strike. They didn’t even get him the ball.”

“Isn’t that because Chevali’s defense is that good?”

“Not to hear Strike tell it. He said they needed to bench the quarterback because he was making bad decisions.”

Father snorts. “Did you get to go to the game?”

“Oh yeah. I still have some connections from my time at the Dragons. They weren’t great seats, but I got to see the game and get beer spilled on me.”

“So you don’t sit with the players’ wives?”

I laugh. “Most of the wives don’t go to road games, unless it’s the playoffs. Some of the guys have a different girl in every town, from what Dev tells me.”

He's halfway through his soup and I've barely started. So I ask him about some of the plays in the game, and about the Dragons game that weekend, while I finish my soup.

I'm just licking the spoon clean when my phone rings. I take it out. "Sorry," I say. "In case it's Dev." Father nods while I look at the number. "Oh. Aunt Carolyn." I frown. "Little early for her to call."

He holds up a paw as I move to put the phone away. "Go ahead and take it. She's probably worried."

"All right." So I pick it up and say hi.

"Happy Thanksgiving," she says, and then waits.

"I'm with Father," I say. "He just told me."

"Okay, good. Listen, if you need to talk to someone, just call me. I can't believe you were just here and we didn't know a thing about it. Damn that Eileen. I gave her hell."

I smile at Father. "I can't imagine that did any good."

"It did me good. If I thought I could change her mind, I'd still be on the phone with her. Look, I'll let you and Bren get back to dinner. Just wanted to reach out."

"Thanks. I'm okay, really."

The waiter comes by to clear the plates and looks down his muzzle at me. "Sir, the club has a strict policy against cell phones in the public areas."

"Sorry." I say a quick good-bye and hang up.

"So you had a good time in Port City." Father picks up the conversation.

I nod. "Dev was out late celebrating. Last time they had eight wins was in the nineties."

"You didn't go out with him?"

"Not on the team-only things." I shrug. "Like I said. The wives don't go along. I don't want to get in the way."

"Did you get to know any of the players?"

I feel like I'm being interviewed, but I don't know what I'd ask him about other than the divorce, so in a way it's sort of a relief.

“I’ve met some of his teammates back in Chevali. Gerrard Marvell is a nice guy, and Fisher Kingston’s been a good friend to Dev. His wife’s nice, too. Gena. And Charm is great.”

“The kicker.” Father nods. “The one with the ‘guffaw.’”

“That’s him.” I chuckle. “So those guys are pretty cool. I haven’t met most of the offensive players yet, but maybe once I’m down there…”

My cell phone goes off again. Father grimaces. “Relatives will probably be calling you all night.”

“I’ll shut my phone off.” But when I pull the phone up, the number calling is Dev’s. “Oh, hang on.” I bring the phone to my ear. “Hey, handsome.”

He laughs. “Hi, fox. How’s Thanksgiving dinner?”

“It’s fine. I’ll tell you more later. What’s up?”

The waiter sees me and starts across the room. I pretend not to notice. Dev says, “You know how you were supposed to come up here tomorrow?”

Ah, shit, they decided not to invite me. I can’t say I’m surprised, but I am a little disappointed. The waiter stands at the side of our table and clears his throat. “Yeah?” I say.

“Could you come up tonight?”

“What? Why?”

The waiter points to the phone. Part of me is amused that he is so insistently polite in the face of my rudeness. I hold up a paw as Dev answers. “Uncle Roger’s leaving first thing in the morning and he wants to meet you. Once he started in, Aunt Mariya and Aunt Ania did too. Then Auntie Za started in, and, yeah, that was that. So I said I’d call. It’s okay if you can’t make it up. They know you’re with family.”

“Let me ask my father and I’ll call you back. Love you.”

He rumbles and lowers his voice. “Love you too.”

“So sorry,” I tell the waiter, putting my phone away. “Last time, I promise. Look, I’m turning it off.”

“If it happens again,” he says in a low voice, but not low

enough to keep the other diners from looking at us, “I am afraid I will have to ask you to leave.”

“Really.” I raise an eyebrow and look at my father. “What do you say? Want to get out of this place?”

AS LOVELY AND dramatic an exit as that would be, we do stay through dinner. But I call Dev and tell him to save us some pumpkin pie, and so about forty-five minutes later, after a stop at a liquor store to pick up a bottle of nice wine (my father is a traditionalist about being a guest), we’re on the road north.

Father was worried about dressing up, but he was already in a nice shirt and slacks for the country club, and I tell him they won’t care that I’m in jeans any more than the country club did. I have a nice shirt on too, after all.

“I’m guessing his family will be a bit different when they’re not in the hospital,” my father says. “Anyone else there you’ve met before?”

“Nope. I never got to meet any of his uncles or aunts, or even his brother.” My left paw flexes around the steering wheel. The ligament at the base of my thumb still feels stiff where Dev’s father grabbed and sprained it a couple months ago. We’d been arguing over whether I’d continue to see Dev; I won the argument, even though I ended up in the hospital dosed up on painkillers.

And when we drive into Lake Handerson, the first thing I recognize is the large white hospital building, lit up at night. I point it out to my father, and he gives a soft “heh,” looking in the other direction. “And there’s the jail you stayed in.”

“I have to remember to write my review for the Michelin Guide. ‘Lousy food, but at least the service was terrible.’”

“Please do me a favor and do not feel the need to embark on a comparison tour.”

I shake my head. “My fightin’ days are over, Father. Cross my

heart."

His eyes gleam with reflected street light. "No matter what Mikhail says? Or any of his other relatives?"

"I will be on my best behavior. We already discussed this and I promised. Every time I want to make a smart remark I am to go to Dev and whisper it in his ear instead of saying it out loud."

"Sounds like a good system."

We pass a baseball field, lit up and empty. Thanksgiving night, there doesn't seem to be much reason for it to be on, but there it is. Most of the rest of the town is dark, all the inhabitants at home with family and turkey. One theater marquee shines down a street packed with cars; two blocks down, the street is empty, small flickering lights illuminating the signs of jewelry stores and pawnshops.

I remember the way to Dev's family's house, even without my father's navigation help. There are cars packed out on the street here, too. I point out the large maple tree in his yard as we get out of the car. "That's where Dev's father's friends waited while we argued. He called them over to beat me up."

My father looks across the car at me, holding the wine in the crook of one arm. "Should we have stopped for a shiv before going in here?"

"Ah, me and Ivan are cool now," I say. "He might be there too. Mikhail talks about him like he's family."

We walk up the drive, checking the maple tree first, but it's clear of everything but maple seeds and fallen leaves, a smell of fall I know from home. On the porch, I remember standing with Dev and hearing his father tell him not to come back, the words penetrating even the blinding pain of my thumb. But we did come back, we didn't give up, and here I am again.

The lights are on in every room on the lower floor. I glance up, but I'm not sure which window is Dev's room, or even if he's staying in there now. There's the babble of probably a dozen voices and the powerful smell of tigers all over the porch, and it's no

trouble for me to sort Dev's scent out of the rest. That overcomes my hesitation; I bounce up to the door and ring the bell.

For a moment, I wonder if anyone's heard it over the noise. But after several seconds, the door opens, letting light and conversation and the smells of turkey, cranberry, pumpkin pie, stuffing, wax candles, and tiger drift out around us. Dev's mother, Duscha, smiles when she sees us.

"Thank you for changing your plans," she says. "Please, come in. Happy Thanksgiving. It's good to see you, Lee."

She holds her arms at her sides, tentatively out, and I choose to view that as an invitation for a hug. I step in, and she hugs firmly enough that I think I guessed right. "Good to see you, too." I don't add, *not at the hospital*. "Hope you two are well."

Would Mother hug me that warmly? The thought bothers me as I step back from Duscha, but I resolve to put that aside and just enjoy the company.

"I'm Brenly," Father says, holding out the bottle. "I brought this for you."

"Thank you so much. I remember you." Duscha is small for a tiger, but she is still taller than either of us. She takes the wine and beams down at us. "Please, come in." She closes the door behind us and gestures toward the stairs. "You may put your coats in Devlin's room. Lee, you remember where it is."

Oh, very well I do. I hold out my hand for my father's coat and look up to see Dev walking across the living room toward me, a huge smile on his face, almost pushing his relatives out of the way. And as he goes by, they turn in his wake to watch, a room full of tigers staring down at us. The conversation dies enough for me to hear the very soft music in the background, some kind of classic rock mix.

"Why don't I show you where we're putting the coats?" Dev says in his low rumble, and his smile, infectious, makes mine even wider.

"Sure," I say, and then, "Well, no. I should stay with Father."

Father smiles. “Go on, go on. I’ll be fine. There’s plenty of company here.”

“All right.” I beam, tail wagging, and fall in behind Dev. “Lead on.”

My father clears his throat. “Don’t be long,” he says pointedly.

“We won’t.” I look around, but I don’t see Mikhail.

Fortunately, Duscha takes my father by the arm. “I will introduce you to my brother,” she says.

I feel a slight pang of guilt at leaving my father alone in a party of tigers, but it’s not enough to resist being dragged upstairs by my boyfriend. We get to his room, he kicks the door closed behind us, and I’ve barely got the coats on the bed before he’s wrapped me up, squeezing so hard I gasp. I wrap my arms around him in return and lift my muzzle to his.

“So how long you think we’ve got?” I ask in the husky female voice he likes sometimes.

“Not long enough.” He presses his muzzle to mine, forcing my lips apart with his tongue, and I close my eyes for the kiss.

My whole body shivers against his, tail swishing, the warmth and his tongue and his body and his paws all sharp in my awareness. The scent of tiger overwhelms me, like coming home.

I’d been joking about having enough time to have a quickie, but I find myself just wanting to stay in his arms the whole night, clothes on or off. Sure, off is always preferable, but just standing together is more than we’ve had for two weeks and he doesn’t show any more sign of wanting to break off the kiss than I do.

Finally, I feel a snagging tug at my shirt. I pull my muzzle back to smile up at him. “Hey, watch the claws,” I say.

The snagging vanishes. He presses hard, clawless fingers into my back on either side of my spine. “I missed you,” he says, nosing down across the bridge of my muzzle to lick between my ears.

I laugh and work my muzzle under his chin. “Missed you too, tiger.” I sigh into his fur. “But I should go rescue my father.”

“What’s the matter with him? Problems with your mother

again?"

I don't want to get into the whole divorce thing now. It's not just that I don't want to drop it on Dev. It's also that I don't want to talk about it. "Yeah. I'll tell you more later. So who's here that I should know about?"

"Let's see. My Uncle Roger…"

I giggle against him. "Someday I'll have to introduce your Uncle Roger to my Uncle Roger."

"I don't know about that."

I feel the rumble as he talks, the uncertainty in his shifting weight. My ears perk. "I thought he was the one who wanted to meet me."

"Yeah. Um." He rests his paws on my shoulders. "He and my dad argued about that. I think what he said was, 'I gotta see this fox.'"

The room cools. I step back as far as his paws will let me, about two inches. "So I'm a sideshow."

"Aunt Mariya and Auntie Za both actually want to meet you. Aunt Mariya says she has a gay friend back in Gateway. Or at least a gay hairdresser."

"Really? A hairdresser?" I shake my head. "I'm surprised she doesn't know any interior decorators or travel agents."

"She might. She didn't say."

He's half-smirking, so I don't know if he's serious or not. "All right. So one gawker and two Gayland tourists."

"Auntie Za's not…" He laughs. "Well, you'll just have to meet her."

"Will do. Anyone else?" I curl my tail around his leg. "What about your brother and…Marta, right?"

He reaches up to scratch behind his ear. "Gregory's here, yeah. I think he is, anyway. He's been…kinda weird this holiday." He shrugs when I give him a look. "Just…cold."

"On some kind of 'you're unnatural and going to Hell' kick?" I say it a little more flip than probably I should, and Dev looks away,

ears going down. “Sorry.” I step in and hug him again. “Let’s go downstairs. We’ll deal with ‘em.”

Divisions *is available where you bought this e-book.*